

What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic

SOMETIMES a book or a movie or a poem comes precisely at the moment that one needs it. As any reader knows, this is a moment of profound communion, a rare moment in which we can feel less alone in our world and more together in our thoughts. This is the feeling that filled me as I read Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam?* This is the book that I have been looking for. I wanted to thank the author for having finally brought such a book into the world, but he had just died. As I read it, I wanted to engage him in debate, ask him questions, think and rethink the issues he raises, but he is gone, and I instead turn to the diverse and erudite footnotes of his text, jotting down the many ways in which we, his readers, can push these thoughts in new directions.

It is rare, of course, to begin a book review with a feeling. It is precisely what we, as scholars, learn not to do. We learn not to do it especially if we want to be taken seriously. It becomes a particularly important measure if we, as outsiders to the hegemony—as women, and/or as Muslims—want to be taken seriously. As if our emotions have no place in our thoughts, as if our beliefs are simply biases that endanger our objectivity. However, this is precisely the problem at the heart of the study of 'other' cultures: that we must position ourselves as outsiders, all the more so if we speak from inside. As a feminist liberal Muslim woman, I belong to a religion that, in its blanket resistance to Western and colonial inspired modernism, has adopted an alternative modernism rooted in punishingly misogynistic patriarchy which it grounds in a puritanical, reductionist understanding of Islam. My religion excludes me. And yet as a scholar, an Islamic art historian, I know that the

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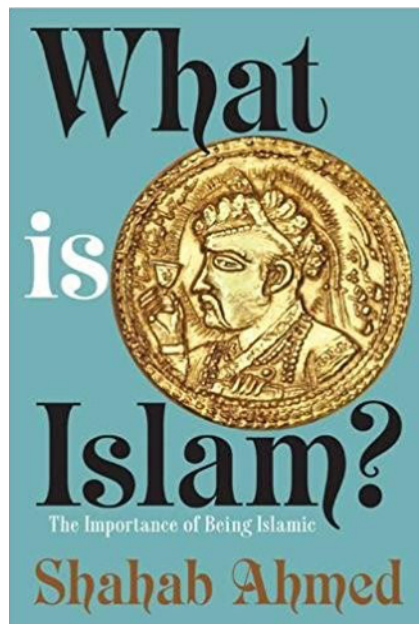
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historical legacies of Islamic arts—in which I include visual arts, music, poetry, philosophy—show us a far more diverse, inclusive, expressive, and sexy face of Islam. There is a place for me in that history, but not in the living space

of Islam. And yet, the idea of scholarship also excludes this relationship with history as a part of faith. But I do not believe that it should. And while I have no say over how religion should function, the very premise of reasoned argument at the heart of scholarship gives me the authority to have some say in what the rules of the game might be here.

The approach of Islamic studies, and its many associated branches and fields—history, Qur'anic studies, art history, national studies, etc.—has been to maintain the positivist secularist approach which places the scholar at a remove from faith. Like scholars who write in the consciousness of their national origins (most famously, Edward Said in his grounding of Orientalism in the contemporary politics of Palestine), scholars who express their Islamic faith, natives (Seyyed Hossein Nasr) or converts (Muhammad Asad or Titus Burckhardt), have often been considered biased because they partake of the faith of which they write. Even if the vocabulary is no longer used, there remains a taint of 'going native', a taint that those of us who are (partially or entirely) native can only avoid through adopting the fully dispassionate trappings of secular scholarship. And yet who is to say that the so-called objective position, the position that looks to origins at the root of authenticity, and finds divergence from this premise heterodox or folk, mixed and therefore inauthentic, is the only one with a right to define a culture? Who is to say that a believer cannot also write with great nuance of the complexity of history? Who is to say that the passion of belief cannot also inform the nuance and creativity of intellectual inquiry? Nobody. And this is precisely what this book shows.

This conflict has a longstanding legacy in Orientalism. In his monumental effort to sort out the corpus of Ottoman poetry, E. J. W. Gibb expressed the role of the Orientalist in terms common for his era, but deeply essentialist in our own. Using the trope of racism, Conte de Gobineau, as his authority, Gibb opines, ‘... The Eastern is far more alive to the details of a subject than he is to the subject taken as a whole. This mental attitude is maintained in the presence of all phenomena, psychical and material alike; the true Oriental is ever in the position of the man who cannot see the wood on account of the trees ... the Easterns, both as individuals and as nations, have, for all their courage and intelligence, been so often the victims of Europeans, in many respects inferior to themselves, but possessed of a decision and resolution to which they are strangers’ (A History of Ottoman Poetry, London, 1900, i. 27). He thus baldly articulates the advantage of the Orientalist over the local: an ability, granted through the remove of his objectivity, granted by the fact of his foreignness to see the forest rather than the trees. This supposed opposition between participating in a culture and understanding it reappears in Henri Corbin’s work, as he points out that the moment we relegate the imaginal reality articulated by the mystics who played such a central role in Islam as flight, we misapprehend Islam. He asks, ‘can a gnostic be really understood by an agnostic?’ (‘Visionary Dream in Islamic Spirituality’, in G. E. von Grunebaum and Roger Caillois (eds.), *The Dream and Human Societies* [Berkeley, CA, 1966]). Between these poles in sympathy towards intrinsic understandings of Islam, lies a presumption that true understanding can only be articulated from a voice that situates itself outside of the Islamic. This is precisely where the subtitle of Ahmed’s work comes in: his is not an Islam that opposes forest and trees, but recognizes that without the complex interaction of trees and all the other creatures of the woods, there

can be no forest.

It is important to articulate Islam as Islamic, refusing to segregate an unknowable realm of belief from the knowable realm of facts. By treating belief as transcendent and granting it a timeless unknowability, we also lose our ability as scholars to articulate the real ways in which faith historically has acted in the world. Islam emerges not welded to origins or slavish to doctrines, but through the perpetual renegotiation of ideas in the world. Thus Ahmed approaches the question of what is Islam not from an explication of origins and history, but by directly addressing the apparent contradictions which have made the religion so difficult to define. It is this desire to define, he explains, that constructs the need for a coherent ‘Islam’ that appears internally contradictory. Situating Islam not as a body of consistent doctrine but as an expansive discursive field, he seeks not the ‘truth’ of Islam so much as the ways in which Islamic cultures have developed multiple engagements with the world in the light of Divine Truth. Shifting from one mode to another is a deeply political act, as it eliminates a very convenient authoritative divide between theologians and non-theologians. Such a position requires an epistemological shift that reconsiders the boundaries of ‘Islam’ in a manner that also reframes the epistemic boundaries of Islamic studies and related disciplines. Already in the early twentieth century, the modernizing Islamic reformer Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) suggested that the Qur’an needs to be understood not as a book of historical stories, but as admonitions derived through the stories, a position which ultimately potentially compromises the factuality of the Qur’an, resituating the definitive as allegorical. Although modern revivalists initially took up the originalist, positivist, anti-colonial, and anti-Western aspects of his thought, reformers who have built on his literary model for looking at the Qur’an, and by extension religion,

such as Taha Hussein (1889–1973), Nasr Abu Zayd (1943–2010), and Mohammed Arkoun (1928–2010) engendered controversy by contradicting the established authorities of al-Azhar University in Cairo.

In the context of the rise of the Islamic regime in Iran and more recent developments in puritanical Islam—the spreading power of Wahhabi interpretations fostered through the wealth of Gulf regimes, as well as renegade puritans like the Taliban and the so-called Islamic State, the idea of the most authentic Islam as the most restrictive has taken hold both in the West and in Europe. Whereas in 1992, Samuel Huntington’s proposition that Islam and the West presented an intrinsic ‘clash of civilizations’ seemed reductive, today it has become a truism. Yet one of the factors that has enhanced its truth is that we, as cultural historians, have assumed it to be true, and have often separated the user-friendly, cultural aspects of Islam—Sufi poetry, Islamic art, and Islamic science—from their intimate engagement with the practice and thought of Islam. By taking culture outside of the realm of religion, we have imagined a religion with no history and no culture: perfect for the timeless authentication of puritanical theologians. In offering a much more dynamic understanding of Islam, Ahmed sets the stage for a new engagement between the so-called secular realms in which cultural analysts often feel at home, and the so-called religious realm that once informed them. He sets his course clearly: ‘I am seeking to say the word ‘Islam’ in a manner that expresses the historical and human phenomenon that is Islam in its plenitude and complexity of meaning.

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