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The Interpretative Pivot: Hermeneutics and the Contemporary Decline of Islamic Pluralism

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The Interpretative Pivot: Hermeneutics and the Contemporary Decline of Islamic Pluralism – by Peter Gottschalk

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Peter Gottschalk August 26, 2016

The sixth essay in [a forum](#) on Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam?*

In the penultimate chapter – “Applications and Implications: Coherent Contradiction, Exploration, Diffusion, Form and Meaning, Modern” – of his precisely argued and wide-ranging volume, Shahab Ahmed strives at once to outline the historical social frame in which seemingly dichotomous elements of Islam were once reconciled while also tracking critical changes in the modern umma. Although most of the chapter focuses on pre-modern conditions in the “Balkans-to-Bengal” region, it pivots on the effort to resist the legalistic paradigms and religion-secular binary that define so much of both modern Muslim societies and academic Muslim studies. While resisting a nostalgic imaginary, Ahmed attempts to demonstrate how Muslim understandings of Islam have narrowed significantly in ways that have eschewed a millennium-old tradition of epistemic diversity and undermined an inherent pluralism that this one afforded. Overall, therefore, Ahmed seeks to challenge prevailing Muslim legalistic models that appear to seek a meta-interpretative uniformity while advancing a model of Islam that sidesteps pervasive modern assumptions about religions as phenomena. Each of these endeavors pivots on Ahmed’s epistemic holism that embraces the possibility of coherent contradiction and mutually imbricated identities. If that seems a lot to unpack, you’re right. Which is why Ahmed reserves 137 pages for the exercise.



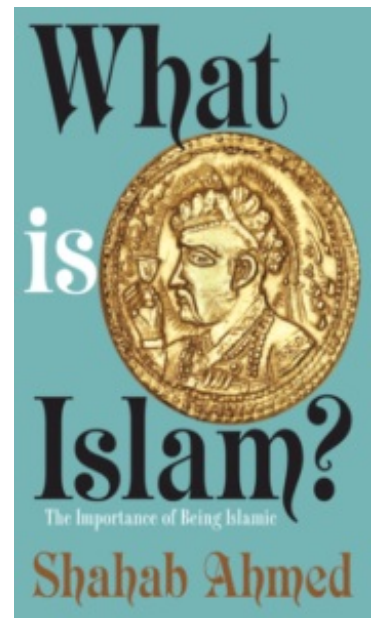
Drawing on the distinctions established in the preceding chapter, Ahmed defines “Islam” as “the hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation.” The Text is the Qur’an. Pre-Text refers to the ontological reality upon which the Revelation necessarily depends, because it precedes the act of revelation. The discursive and interpretative worlds by which Muslims have attempted historically to make meaning from the Qur’an represents the Con-Text of Revelation. Chapter 6 laments the steep decline in importance of the Pre-Text and Con-Text for modern Muslims, who – often influenced by both Wahhabi hermeneutics and Western legalism – increasingly define Islam only in regard to a juridical reading of the Text. While other scholarship has considered the global impact of Wahhabi ideology fueled by oil wealth, Ahmed offers an epistemological account that details the deeper hermeneutical shift that has had such profound and widespread impact because of a meta-interpretative reorientation.

Much of the chapter seeks to demonstrate the loss by describing the complex layers of often counter-flowing streams of meaning that swirled concomitantly in many pre-modern societies. Focusing on the *paideia* prevalent among education elites in the Balkans-to-Bengal region, the author uses long, detailed analyses of artifacts such as a sixteenth-century Herat miniature illustrating a couplet by [Hafiz](#), a Persian couplet by [Amir Khusraw](#), and a story from *Gulistân* by [Sa’di of Shiraz](#). Through these, he demonstrates how wine consumption could be both revered and reviled, music might be meaningful yet menacing, and *fiqh* (human interpretation of *shari’ah* or God’s law) and *siyâsah* (government law) might be mutually imbricated in any particular Muslim community. Instead of positing these positions as binaries or on a spectrum between “observant” and “lapsed” Muslim practices and beliefs, Ahmed argues for juxtapositions that could simultaneously exist because of an understood acceptance of alternative approaches to defining what is “Islamic.” This component of his argument has two dimensions.

The first posits that “Islamic” seldom had a narrow definition in the hegemonic Balkans-to-Bengal *paideia* defined by Persian, Turkish, and Arabic education and literacy. Legalistic, Sufi, philosophic, and other Muslim epistemes competed with one another but coexisted. Anchored in the allowance that the Pre-Text could not be defined by or restricted entirely to an understanding of the Qur’an, the unseen Reality of the Pre-Text might be accessible using other approaches than the legalistic, Text-based one. Negotiation and conversation characterized the situation. Hence, practitioners of one school of thought might argue against others (as in al-Ghazzali’s famous *Refutation of the Philosophers*), but in most instances multiple epistemes coexisted making claims about what was “Islamic” essentially polyvocal. “Islam,” in this meta-interpretative model, is dynamic, contested, and lively with possibilities, yet unified by an understood pluralism.

The second dimension of Ahmed’s approach to the term argues for a quite expansive use of “Islamic.” Unrestricted to the realm of “religion” designated by secular-religious binaries, “Islamic” can be applied to Muslim and non-Muslim practices, beliefs, and expressions that might not appear “religious” or not Muslim to modern eyes. In doing so, the author helpfully reengages a problem that has long puzzled Islamicists: how to describe cultural productions made by Muslims without reducing them all to “religion”? Marshall Hodgson’s famous solution using the term “Islamicate” has proven unsatisfactory and undertheorized for some scholars, and so Ahmed moves in a different direction. Mistakenly stating that Hodgson’s approach fails to include non-Muslim products influenced by Islam, he portrays his formulation that does so as providing a more expansive answer. As he writes regarding one example found in the context of various pre-modern visual and poetic representations, “The wine-cup is Islamic not despite its function, but *because* of it. It is Islamic precisely because of the (contradictory) values and engagement by Muslims with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text.”

With this approach, the author reminds us how the deliberations and ramifications of Islam can reverberate into the quotidian corners of Muslim lives, far from the mosque and the ulama. Moreover, painting, music, science, and other



productions can be “Islamic” without explicit references to the Qur’an. This proves particularly helpful in regard to “Islamic science.” Given that the modern religion/science dichotomy is seemingly defined by an anti-rationalist/rationalist divide at least as deep as the religion/secularism one, Ahmed’s demonstration of how the pre-modern rational articulations of both could be congruent and mutually supportive proves insightful. Because in the earlier *paideia* the cosmos represented an expression of the Divine Truth that was the Pre-Text, its rational investigation contributed to the Islamic effort to understand that Truth. Hence, science in this environment was Islamic.

Although not explored at length by Ahmed, this expansion of what constitutes Islamic items promises important consequences for describing intercommunal dynamics. “Can meanings produced by non-Muslims be a part of Con-Text? Obviously: yes.” And, so, Aristotelian and Platonic thought is Islamic not because of their genealogy (a common way of ascribing identifiers) but because of their synthesis with Muslim thought. Meanwhile, non-Muslims can join in an Islamic Con-Text through their own syntheses. Ahmed gives the example of Sikh wrestlers in twentieth century Punjab who shouted *Yâ ‘Alî* before entering into contest. “His act is *precisely* an Islamic act—it is *meaningful in terms of Islam*.” This makes room for blendings with other traditions that remain coherently meaningful to all those involved, instead of an inchoate mélange of ill-fitting pieces as it may appear to those who disapprove.

Unfortunately, Ahmed provides less insight into the limits of these Islamic qualifiers. Is the cup’s character perennially Islamic for all pre-modern Muslims? Is it Islamic for Muslims today? Is it possible that a Sikh wrestler made his exclamation with as little intentional reference to its historical reference as many Americans do when they shout *Geronimo!* before jumping or utter *Christ!* when agitated? Is the scholar’s description of the Sikh’s cry “Islamic” any more helpful than describing the other examples as “Indian” or “Christian”? The confusion stems in part from the oscillation of the chapter’s argument between a focus on the intentionality inherent in its emphasis on meaning-making of the individual and a focus on the larger social discourse through which contrary ideas are contrasted, negotiated, and tolerated. Therefore, it remains unclear whether scholars should apply the term “Islamic” based on the deliberations of the individual Muslim or on the discourse of the larger Muslim community.

Ahmed’s scholarship – for all its perception, exactness, and promise for spurring new approaches – has its limitations. Two in particular restrict the effectiveness and future of his argument. First, his geographic range and historical depth of study regarding Muslim societies and expressions are not matched by considerations of how his analysis might find parallels in the study of other religious communities. Of course, this may seem absurd to expect – and it cannot be expected – but without this, parts of his argument unwelcomely play into the hands of Islamophobic discourse. For instance, might it not be argued that many non-Muslim traditions have facilitated similar changes in their meta-interpretative frameworks as a result of legalistic and other turns ushered in by modernity? Not arguing for analogies in other traditions leaves the impression that Sufis and philosophers represent “good Muslims” relative to the *fiqh*-minded “bad Muslims,” just as many public commentators and even some scholars have suggested. Given Ahmed’s narrative of the latter gradually gaining the upper hand against the former, readers might assume that bad Muslims increasingly eclipse the good. But if we can track similar shifts (as I suspect we might) among Christians, Hindus, and others that demonstrate how increasingly powerful currents of legalism among them all reflects secular dynamics, then such simplistic unfortunate conclusions might be better avoided.

The second major limitation to Ahmed’s argument derives from his definition of Islam as purely a vehicle of meaning-making. Although Ahmed offers an insightful (albeit short) deliberation on the impact modern conditions made on Muslim societies and hermeneutics while demonstrating a sensitivity to the shortfalls of modern paradigms for “religion” (indeed, he eschews use of the term), he seemingly fails to rise beyond a very Protestant model of religion as primarily belief and intention. According to the author, the decisions Muslims reach relative to Islam about the interpretations they make, the music they sing, the clothes they wear, and the drink they consume stem entirely from their endeavors to make meaning. Aesthetics, habit, discipline, embodiment, and ritual exist, but not as motivation, only as by-product. To a degree, this results from the necessarily select documentary sources from which the author can choose to make his case. Elites educated in the curriculum of the Balkans-to-Bengal *paideia* crafted material expressions that represent almost all we have as representations from the pre-modern period. Yet

even they did not live lives entirely defined by meaning-making. Meanwhile, the mass of Muslims then and today, I suspect, engage what they consider “Islam” in non-rational as well as rational ways that may be informed by the Con-Text associated with the Qur’an but not entirely defined by it.

This definition of Islam as meaning-making combined with Ahmed’s expansive (and perhaps unlimited) labeling of Muslim objects, practices, and expressions as “Islamic” has an additional outcome. One of the foundation stones of contemporary Islamophobia is the perception that Muslims only ever are Muslims (that is, religiously defined), and hence cannot share much with their non-Muslim neighborhoods. Ahmed argues that he has sidestepped the suggestion that “everything is religion” by putting aside the notion of religion, but this seems unsatisfactory in regard to larger discourses today. While happily challenging an overly simplistic religious/secular divide and embracing how a wine-cup could be Islamic, Ahmed’s apparently unlimited use of this ascription has yet more consequences in addition to those mentioned above. Was (is?) the wine-cup always Islamic? Can Muslims engage a wine-cup in a non-Islamic manner when they are not considering it in the Con-Text of Revelation? How much is left of a Muslim’s life that is not purportedly Islamic, and how does that compare to Jews, Buddhists, and atheists?

The consequence of all these limitations is that the definition of Islam is restricted to the formal intellectual productions of educated elites while the commensurability of Islam with anything else becomes questionable. By forsaking the comparative category “religion,” Ahmed undermines the possibilities of comparison (as the adage goes, one can’t compare apples and oranges – unless, of course, one uses the category of “fruit”) just when the stakes of doing so are perhaps at their highest in the English-speaking world (and elsewhere). Although he hints at the possibility of comparison with occasional mentions of Jewish, Sikh, and Hindu practices, these are too sporadic to promote any analytic approach. Answering his question “What is Islam?” in regard to today, Ahmed’s portrait of a narrowly defined, legalistic set of ideologies centered on the Qur’an and increasingly shorn of the pluralistic impulses afforded by Sufi and other traditions appears entirely [consonant with the “bad Muslim” model far too pervasive currently](#). This does not make the author’s argument wrong, just in need of a broadened Con-Text of its own (which I suspect this journal volume represents a nascent form). Other scholars would do well to set Shahab Ahmed’s argument into a comparative nexus in order to bring his keen analysis to bear on other traditions while demonstrating that many of the modern dynamics that today determine what is Islam also influence – in their own culturally specific ways – other religious traditions.