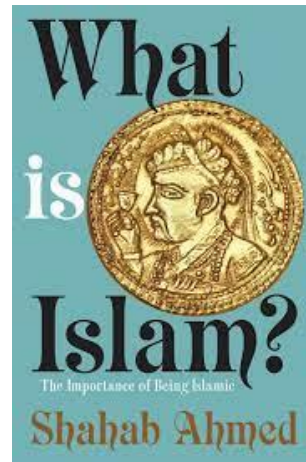


Shahab Ahmed. *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. 624. ISBN: 9780691164182. Hardcover. Price: \$39.50.

Shahab Ahmed's seminal book *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* gives a completely new perspective on how we constitute the "Islamic" or "Islam," as reflected in the title. Ahmed delves into the history of Muslim societies in the "Balkans to Bengal Complex" with their social, political, cultural, intellectual, artistic, and normative understanding of Islam that amalgamates law, philosophy, and Sufism. His main project is to problematize the overly legalistic aspect of Islam when one conceives of Islamic or Islam. He situates such reductionist understandings of Islam in modernity with nation-states having their own separate laws and with everything revolving around law within these states. Hence, modern citizens think of actions only from that lens. To Ahmed, in the "Balkans to Bengal Complex," it was not law alone that constituted the Islamic-ness of these societies. Instead, it was its intersection with arts, philosophy, Sufism, and "explorative" thought that formed the Islamic normative. Furthermore, the key terms he uses to explain the normative Islamic or Islamic normative are the "explorative" and "creative" forms of Islam instead of the overly emphasized "prescriptive" or "restrictive" form. He gives specific examples of Urdu, Persian, and Arabic poetry and shows the Mughal emperor's painting on the coin with its wine symbols referring to wine drinking, hence situating it in its Islamic context. To Ahmed, normative Islam in this context is wine drinking/symbolism, Islamic arts, and the Sufi-philosopher amalgam that helps us conceptualize Islam beyond the "text."



Ahmed introduces a more wholesome way of conceptualizing Islam by defining its pre-text and con-text of the prophetic revelation. "Pre-text" refers to the universalized form of rational knowledge intermingled with a more personalized and experiential Sufi experience. "Text" refers to the scriptures, the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, which are overemphasized and normative-ized because of Islam's intersection with the modern. Similarly,

* <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v61i3.2478>

“con-text” refers to the sum of all epistemologies in which text and pre-text operate. In a nutshell, Ahmed argues that we need to conceptualize Islam as a hermeneutical engagement in the pre-text, text, and con-text of revelation. For some actions, the text is sufficient for that engagement. In contrast, for some others, such as rational Islamic philosophy, transcendental Sufi epistemology, Islamic painting/arts, or wine drinking, one needs to engage with the pre-text and con-text of the revelation.

Ahmed’s conception is comprehensive, and it does help us better contextualize Islam in its societies while going beyond the legalistic/normative boundaries and engaging with the more explorative Islamic. At the same time, one problem could be how one interprets “Islamic” violence or “Islamic” terrorism through Ahmed’s lens. As per his conceptualization of Islam/Islamic, while making it clear that “Islam is not whatever Muslims say it is,” we should engage with whatever Muslims say “in its locus for expression and articulation of being a Muslim” while hermeneutically engaging with the text, pre-text, and con-text. Now, one could situate arguments related to Islamic violence in the articulation of the meaning of the text. Thus, the question arises that if we call terrorism or violence “Islamic,” do we not disregard other significant factors that caused it in the modern context, such as the role of the imperial US while allying with the Saudis and Pakistan in the creation of the Taliban to defeat the Soviets in the 1980s? Do we not essentialize and associate such violence with Islam while ignoring what was/is its “human and historical phenomenon” vis-à-vis these government alliances? Also, Ahmed does not seem to give alternative examples of cases that he would count as “un-Islamic” (when he argues that Islam is not whatever Muslims say it is) where there is some connection between Islam/Islamic and particular acts. Still, it is hard to categorize them as Islamic or un-Islamic. In other words, while giving us a comprehensive analytical tool, he does not guide us in constituting “what is not Islam? the importance of being un-Islamic.” Can there be actions that Muslims would call Islamic but Ahmed would not, and why? We do not know about that.

Subsequently, Ahmed’s critique of binaries such as secular-religious and holy-profane is emphatic as it alludes to the idea that these binaries are difficult to impose on Islam/Islamic. Hence, they tend to view Muslims/Islam/Islamic from a Eurocentric lens. For the same reasons, Ahmed makes a point that as per Islam/Islamic, drinking wine, the Sufi-philosophical amalgam based on pluralistic truth-seeking achieved through rationality and arts can all be Islamic. He also argues that Islam has no monolithic, orthodox, institutionalized power like the Church in

Christianity. Thus, it must be understood in its context with its own complexities and particularities.

Furthermore, Ahmed presents Islam as a “coherent contradiction” with its unity and diversity where multiple views over similar issues not only exist but were also manifested in reality in the “*Balkans to Bengal complex*.” In this manner, the use of “metaphor” and “paradox” is prevalent in the literature, arts, and poetry of Islamic societies. This view seems to broaden the meaning of Islam and Islamic as it appreciates the presence of multiple meanings of Islam that go far beyond the fixed, legalistic meanings and includes the wide cultural, social, political, and literary purposes of human actions. At the same time, while Ahmed emphasizes the “contradictions” within the Islamic tradition and presents them in a fancy way, one might ask whether there is not still something to be said about the consistently held beliefs of a large majority that believes in that legalistic normativity.

In addition, a phrase worth discussing is “the human and historical Islam,” as Ahmed mentions it various times in the book. He argues that when one talks about Islam, they do not constitute the full meanings related to the human and historical phenomenon of Islam. One could also argue that the “restrictive” or “legalistic” Islam based on normative practices is also a “human and historical phenomenon” and thus is not separate from it. The normativity associated with considering the use of alcohol impermissible, as well as the normative critique of Islamic painting and thus the restrictive change in Muslim behaviour, is also nothing less than a “human and historical phenomenon.”

Another impression one gets while reading the book is the construction of a binary between “legalistic” and “creative” Islam, even though Ahmed aims to debunk that. One might argue that, in Muslim societies, “law,” social norms, customs, and politics worked in amalgamation instead of isolation. In other words, there might be examples where scholars, philosophers, or poets would drink wine, but they would consider it impermissible and feel regretful over their sinful behaviour. One relevant example could be that Muslims might drink not because it is Islamic but for social reasons, addiction, or other justifications. The point is that they could be ashamed of their sinful behaviour, and hence they dismiss Ahmed’s thesis that they drink while thinking of it in a normative Islamic way (in other words, they drink but not because they should). The same regretful behaviour could be true of Mughal emperor Jahāngīr or in other examples that Ahmed mentions in the book (I certainly do not live in the historical “Balkans to Bengal

Complex” but thought that the lamentation and regret of wine drinking could be relevant here related to a typical Muslim behaviour).

Overall, Ahmed’s book broadens our horizons to understand normative Islam beyond the law/text with deep insights into human and historical Islam of the “Balkans to Bengal Complex.” At the same time, one could also argue that the meaning of Islam/Islamic could have been expanded while only shedding light on Islamic arts, poetry, literature (*adab*), polity, philosophy, and Sufism without presenting the use of wine or wine drinking as normative. This particular example seems problematic as the goal was to *redefine* Islam or Islamic, not how certain Muslims/rulers/Sufis/philosophers reacted (to wine drinking or *Islamic* painting) at a particular time. Thus, as a reader, one takes the more holistic definition of Islam and Islamic offered by Ahmed but can be hesitant to buy into the idea of making drinking wine normative in the “Balkans to Bengal Complex.” Wine drinking indeed existed, but the normativity associated with it may be not while also leaving the possibility of regret over the sinful behaviour of wine drinking.

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