What Is Islam?
Reading Group: Session Five of Six
Chapter 5: Hermeneutical Engagement, Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text, Meaning-Making for the Self, Spatiality of Revelation, Hierarchy, Exteriority-Interiority, Public and Private, Language and Vocabulary, Ambivalence and Ambiguity, Metaphor and Paradox

Chapter Five begins Part Three of Ahmed's book, "Re-Conceptualizations". Ahmed has spent the first four chapters aiming to demonstrate the many deficiencies of previous conceptualization of Islam; he has referred to the six questions in order to demonstrate the particular ways previous conceptualizations have failed to understand them as Islamic. The present aim is to re-conceptualize **Islam as a process**, and **not as a religion, culture, civilization, symbol system, discursive tradition, essence, or core/kernel**.

> "[The] goal and touchstone of a successful conceptualization of Islam as theoretical object and analytical category must be to *locate and explain,* to the fullest degree possible, the *logic of internal contradiction that allows contradictory statements and actions to cohere meaningfully to their putative object*—whether this coherence lies in idea, imagination, practice, substance or process. Such a conceptualization should enable us to use the term 'Islam/Islamic' in a manner that *comprehends* the integrity and identity of the complex historical and human phenomenon at play and at stake, rather than distorting or fracturing it." (p. 302)

I suggest we pay careful attention to this aim, as well as the language used to express it, throughout the chapter. There is something subtly theological (in the broad senses of the term) in Ahmed's "logic of internal contradiction" **whereby *coincidentiae oppositorum* (*jumūʿ al-aḍdād*) are rendered the rule rather than the exception**.

Ahmed proceeds to juxtapose elements, trajectories, and values of "human and historical Islam" as evidenced in the six questions with those given precedence and priority in previous conceptualizations of Islam (p. 303):

Generally marginalized, seeking to include:	**Exclusively included:**
exploration, ambiguity, ambivalence, wonder, aestheticization, diffusion, differentiation, polyvalence, relativism, contradiction	prescription, proscription, restriction, homogenization, monovalency, orthodoxy, agreement, authority, control,

> "Symptomatic of [this] marginalization…in the conceptualization of Islam is the fact that a unique feature of the study of societies of Muslims, as compared to other societies, is that **so much *value* is given and *meaning* ascribed to the *prescriptive* and *restrictive* discourses of Muslims, such as law and creed, and so little *value* is given and *meaning* ascribed to *explorative* and *creative* discourses such as fictional literature, art and music**. Simply, when Muslims act and speak *exploratively*—as opposed to *prescriptively*—as they seem to have spent a very great deal of their historical time doing, they are somehow not seen to be acting and speaking in a manner and register that is representative, expressive and constitutive of Islam." (p. 303)

In order successfully and inclusively to re-conceptualize Islam in these trajectories, scriptural and legal discourses (commentaries & exegesis of Qur'ān and *aḥādīth*, legal and creedal texts) must no longer

predominate in scholarly analyses; rather, discourses wherein Muslims expounded upon that which they considered to be of "existential meaning, moment and value" must be carefully studied. (p. 304)

Qur'ānic Exegesis by Other Means
(p. 304-310)

The example of the Story of Yūsuf/Joseph in the Qur'ān (Qur'ān 12): When endeavoring to understand the import of this story in the formation of Muslims and the Islamic, a scripturalist, as it were, would turn to the relevant texts from the *tafsīr*/commentarial tradition. However, if someone wishes to take seriously *what actually formed and shaped* Islam through this *sūra* in the Qur'ān, and thus was productive of *meaning, truth,* and *value* for Muslims, then he or she will have to turn, instead, to Jāmī's (d. 1492) reimagining of this story in his *Yūsuf va Zulaykhā*. Not to do so is "to *misread* Islam." (p. 305-306)

- With 783+ manuscripts in the libraries of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan alone (and far more in the region), I would venture to guess that this re-telling and re-valorization of *Sūra Yūsuf* had in fact **far more considerable popular impact than, say, the medieval, Christian commentaries on *The Song of Songs***, which may very well have been restricted in terms of effectiveness *to the monastic communities*.

The example of the *Masnavī-yi Maʿnavī* of Mawlānā Jalāl-ud-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273): This is a 26,000-verse didactic poem that includes 4,500 direct citations from the Qur'ān (excluding allusions thereto) and 700+ *aḥādīth*. Not only does Rūmī himself consider it *fiqh* and *sharʿ*, but it is considered by his son to be a *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān and by Jāmī to be "the Qur'ān in the Persian tongue."

- Footnote 21 on pp. 307-308 is extremely insightful in terms of understanding what Ahmed means by "exegesis by other means".

  "Rūmī ***dis-locates* the text of the Qur'ān** by plucking out of it short passages, individual verses or phrases; he then ***re-locates* these passages**, verses, and phrases into the vast and rich tapestry of the stories of his own weaving that make up his *Distichs/Doublets of Meaning*. In this way, the Qur'ān and fiction become mutually embedded and mutually transposed." (p. 308, see Omar Alí-de-Unzaga's concept of "citational exegesis" in footnote 21)

- On the one hand, we have the ***most studied text* in the *madrasah*** system during the Balkan-to-Bengal complex: *Kashshāf* of al-Zamakhshrī (d. 1144); on the other hand, we have the ***most read* (and *listened to*) text** in the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, *outside* the *madrasah*: Rūmī's *Masnavī*.
- Not only that, but we have this didactic poem being recited, rehearsed, and performed at the numerous *majlis*-gatherings, a "ubiquitous *socio-spatial loci* for ongoing engagement with the Qur'ān and the construction of its meanings in the terms and trajectories and modes and norms of the discursive and social cultures of creative and explorative imaginative fiction." (p. 310)
- Let us not forget the social influence of the Mevlevī Sufi order and the strong financial base it possessed; in fact, a Mevlevī *tekkeh* or *khānqāh* was known in Ottoman cities as a *Dār-ul-Mesnevī* or *Mesnevīẖāneh*. (p. 310)
- Once again, I venture to guess that **the *Masnavī* had an incomparably larger impact on popular constructions and productions of meaning and truth than any text in the history of Christian Europe**, until at least the rise of the popular English *Book of Hours* or the *Bible Moralisée* (*biblia pauperum*) before that. Furthermore, the imaginative commentaries on *The Song of Songs* (to proffer an example), as already stated, were limited in influence to monastic communities. **The most comparable genre would have to be the medieval sermon**.

So, we may return to the question we posed in Chapter One: **is all this possible on account of the diffusion and scope of the Persian language throughout the Balkan-to-Bengal complex?**

Dīndārī Texts
(pp. 310-312)

The Mughal Emperor Akbar, on 21 March 1594, named the following texts as *dīn*-bearing:
- *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* of Ṭūsī (often considered merely a text on "ethics" as opposed to Islam(ic ethics)
- *Masnavī* of Rūmī (fictional re-imagination of Qur'ānic verses)
- *Iḥyā' ʿulūm al-dīn* and *Kīmīyā-'i saʿādat* of al-Ghazzālī (the only texts that have been considered "Islamic" according to previous conceptualizations)
- *Kalīlah wa Dimmah* (pure fiction)

> "Once we are able to recognize fictional texts as 'bearing *dīn*,' we are more readily able to conceive of the *location* of Islam in terms of the larger communicative practices of Muslims speaking as Muslims about *being Muslim*. Fictional texts construct and communicate Islam through the exercise of the creative and explorative imagination. A society that lives these texts is necessarily a society possessed of the sensibilities and values of the modalities of fiction—that is, precisely, of *exploration, ambiguity, ambivalence, wonder, aestheticization, diffusion, differentiation, polyvalence, relativism* and *contradiction*." (p. 311)

Majnūn as Islamic Archetype?
(pp. 312-317)

Ahmed asks why Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792) is unarguably considered an "influential Islamic prototypical figure" when it can be argued that a fictional character had a far more profound impact, at least over a sustained historical and temporal period, in "the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges." (Talal Asad).
- Ahmed cites T. Asad in footnote 36, and I find this important to indicate, viz., **that Ahmed is arguing that the *madhhab-i ʿishq* is a discursive tradition in the way Asad understands it**; except that, instead of focusing on prescriptive discourses of orthodoxy in order to discover authoritative traditions, Ahmed is suggesting that we turn to other genres and discourses.

Beginning in the 12th century, furthermore, the ***ghazal*** "became the pre-eminent form of poetry recited in the societies of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex." The result is that the Majnūn motif-vocabulary inculcated the experience of Majnūn as the "iconic experience of love" within the consciousnesses of Muslims. (p. 313)

> "The point is that it would have been extremely difficult for a Muslim in the Balkans-to-Bengal complex to *experience love* or *desire* without that experience taking as a locus of reference and self-identification and *meaning* the fictional figure of Majnūn whose passionate, self-obliterating, love for Laylā configures precisely the *ambiguities and multivalencies* of all three of the carnal, Platonic and Divine registers of quotidian love (the poet-lovers' Laylā is, of course, very much the signifier of the Divine Beloved)." (pp. 313-314)
- There follows several examples from *ghazal*s, all to demonstrate that "all Muslims are Majnūn!" (pp. 314-317)

On Humorous *Jihād* (pp. 317-321)

Ahmed's example that follows is helpful for our discussion because it offers further insight into his argument that we must "**say *Islam* meaningfully**." Evliyā Çelebī tells us joke about *jihād* in general, and the "greater *jihād*" in particular, within his description of the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire. Now, it is evident that one cannot "get the joke" unless he or she is aware of the (perhaps spurious) *ḥadīth* wherein the Prophet is asked about "the greater *jihād*". In other words, "it is the pun on this Hadith that *makes this joke meaningful and meaningfully funny*." (p. 321)

> "Humour takes place precisely in a social and discursive complex or matrix of shared meaning. Here, *to get the joke*—that is, for the "rational soul" to become aware "when laughing, of the meaning of its laughter"—one has to know the Hadith. This joke may not be an expression of piety or devotion or of exegetical and leg reasoning—but it has no *meaning* except as derived from its being embedded (forgive the pun) *in terms of Islam*." (p. 321)

> "The shared terms of the joke is the very vocabulary that constructs and expresses *being Muslim*…the joke is not *at* Islam but is *in* Islam: we Muslims might say the joke is on "us"… Self-irony is not the same as irony because, in self-irony, the person is laughing at the thing in terms of which that person makes himself and gives himself meaning. Self-irony is thus simultaneously the affirmation and undermining of the self…**Evliyā's joke is, thus, nothing other than *Islamic***." (p. 321)

Is this a really valid argument? If a **statement** (a joke, in this case) cannot be understood except in terms of the **shared value of meaning** (the greater *jihād* of the *ḥadīth*, in this case), does that make the statement **part of the process that constituted and produced that meaning** (Islam, in this case)? A better question: **What's at stake in declaring this joke "Islamic" or "not Islamic"?**

Islam as Meaning (pp. 322-329)

> "[Islam] *is the means by which an experience is given meaning, as well as the meaning which the experience is given by that means.* Islam is, in other words, *both means and meaning. Islam is thus located in the nexus, the relationship, the field and the process of engagement with and between the source of meaning, the mode of production of meaning from the source, and the end-product of meaning*." (p. 323)

> "**Meaning/Islam**, or meaning made in terms of Islam, or meaning as Islam, is itself a means by which to constitute things and by which to relate things to each other; Islam is points, terms and frames of reference; it is the components of a complex of relationality by which an **actor or subject orients and constitutes his or her Self** in and by an environment full of other things; it is a **means of ordering** the world **by which the self is also ordered**. To take or make meaning in terms of Islam is thus precisely **to make oneself meaningful in terms of Islam** and **to discourse and act meaningfully in terms of Islam**. To take or make meaning in terms of Islam is also, however, to enter into discourse of meaning and action that is *constitutive of Islam*: by speaking and acting in engagement with that field of meaning, the actor is not only making himself, but is also making the field of meaning: **he is both making Self and making Islam**." (pp. 325-326)

Here we begin to see a **far more operative valence given to Islam and the Islamic**, and this is because Ahmed has brought the "**making of the self**" into the equation. He argues that a Muslim *acting as a Muslim* within any given circumstance wherein *what is Islam* is at stake will react according to "his notion of the *meaning of Islam*—it is *meaningful action constructive and constitutive of the Self and of Islam*." (p. 327) The Self and Islam are in a mutually-productive relationship "that *commit*, in some way, Islam and the Self to each other." (p. 327)

> **To be honest, I am not entirely sure what to make of this very nearly circular argument, as much as I want to agree with it**: "[All] action and discourse that is carried out in terms of the identifying relation between Self and Islam, that makes meaning for both Self and Islam, is constitutive of both Self and Islam. This fundamental dynamic of the mutually-constructing relationship between the individual and collective human Self, on the one side, and Islam, on the other, is at once one of the most crucial and the most neglected elements for the conceptualization of human and historical Islam. What is required is a conceptualization of Islam that cuts to the quick of how it is that *Muslims make Islam just as Islam makes Muslims* in all the evident complexity and contradiction of this process and engagement." **Once again, I am reminded of the human person as correlative to God in Akbarian cosmology.**
> - One side of the spectrum suggests that Muslims make and shape Islam (*islams* not Islam; "Islam is whatever Muslims say it is"). The other suggests that Islam "makes Muslims of *muslims*." (K. Cragg). **Here, Ahmed is suggesting some sort of symbiotic relationship**.

The Self and *Taḥqīq*
(pp. 329-343)

The self is not just a modern, western object of study that arose from Descartes's *cogito* moment; rather, making meaning of the self is a natural concomitant of the human engagement with the phenomenon of Revelation and one's access to Truth thereby. To endeavor to comprehend the Truth of Revelation implies a certain set of presuppositions concerning the nature and constitution of the self vis-à-vis the Divine. (pp. 329-330)

Ahmed then proceeds to look at the comparable *cogito* moment found within Ibn Sīnā's and al-Suhrawardī's corpora, each of whom posit the centrality of self-knowledge. (pp. 330-333)

However, the bulk of this section is dedicated to the **Sufi, anthropocosmic concept of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*)** first elaborated by Ibn ʿArabī and given further explication by subsequent members of the so-called Akbarian tradition. "The Perfect Man comprises in his *self* the Truth and Meaning in the universe such that his act of self-knowledge is knowledge of the very Truth and Meaning of the universe: the Perfect Man is the perfect *self* and the perfect *knower*, his perfect knowledge is precisely perfect *self-knowledge*." (p. 333)

But this is not just some exalted, elitist concept manufactured in the ivory towers of Sufi masters for other Sufi masters, restricted to theoretical sufism and philosophy, but rather **this meaning of the relationship between the self and the Real was common among popular discourse and practice**, too. (pp. 333-338) Examples follow:
- Khwushḥāl Khān Khaṫak, d. 1689 (p. 333-334)
- Javanese didactic poem, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet* (adaptation of a Gujarātī work by Muḥammad al-Burhānpūrī, d. 1620 (pp. 334)

- Rūmī, d. 1273 (pp. 335-336)
- Bullhē Shāh, d. 1758 (pp. 336-338)

> "My point here is to emphasize this conceptualization in history by Muslims of being Muslim (that is, of human and historical Islam) as the 'difficult and dangerous' *exploration* of meaning for the Self—a conceptualization all too often lost in the habitual privileging of *prescriptive* discourses over *explorative* discourses of meaning." (p. 335)

> "When Rūmī says 'I am not a Muslim,' he is understood by Muslims to be saying this *as a Muslim*—indeed, as an *exemplary* Muslim. Thus, to say that in these lines Rūmī, 'by giving voice to a kind of antinomianism…challenged the very foundations of religious identity,' misses the more important half of the point. Rather, what Rūmī is asserting—indeed, celebrating—here is the finding and founding of his identity as a Muslim by his knowledge of the Truth of the Unseen: he is *making* the very foundations of Muslim identity." (p. 336)

> **The typical response to these poems? "*But* these are *Sufi* authors."** As if the adjective "Sufi" somehow negates "Muslim" and "the Islamic." Furthermore, this is "the sort of compartmentalizations and mutual quarantining of discourses that does not present the reality of human and historical Islam. Rather than seeking to *set aside* these authors in a discursive space to which they were not historically limited, **we need to place them in the central discursive space which they occupied as a matter of historical fact, and to read them as what they were (and are)**: figures whose writings are of prodigious circulation and canonical status in the ears and mouths and hearts and minds of Muslims, who express and establish normative claims in regard to *What is Islam?* and whose claims enter into circulation and become available for engagement and meaning-making by Muslims. These poems are widely-recited manifestos for awareness and exploration of the Self as a means and locus of complex possibilities of meaning-making for Muslims in terms of Islam." (p. 338)

Taḥqīq becomes the means by which the **Self** recognizes and **realizes** the **Truth**, the **relationship between the two**, and **things** other than the self "**as they really are**." (*kamā huwa huwa*) In Sufi thought and practice, this is "the process of a person carrying out original personal investigation of a given matter by the rigorous holistic exercise of the holistic capacities of existential knowing, by the imaginal-experiential knowledge of the individual mind-body." (p. 339) **Experience,** or rather **existential experience**, is central to ***taḥqīq*.**

How? Poetry. For "the good dream of a faithful person is one forty-sixth of prophecy." (*ḥadīth*)

> "This notion expresses at the most quotidian—strictly speaking: nocturnal—level the concept of the potential direct revelatory accessibility of the Truth of the Unseen to each and every human being: that we are all partakers in the Revelatory process—that we are all fractional prophets…It is this very logic that we have seen operative in the idea of the inspiration of the poet as a simulacrum of Divine Revelation—a concept summed up by the great Niẓāmī (author of the foundational Majnūn-Laylā epic) who wrote, 'Poetry is the mirror of the visible and the invisible…the curtain of mystery, the shadow of the Prophetic veil,' and who forthrightly proclaimed himself 'Mirror of the Unseen.'" (pp. 339-340)

> The case of Muḥammad Iqbāl and *khwūdī* and *bī-khwudī*. (p. 340-341)

> "I have been trying to impress upon the reader that, in a conceptualization of Islam as theoretical object and analytical category that maps meaningfully onto the human and historical phenomenon of Islam, the idea of the self as constituted by Muslims must occupy a central constitutive place. Our conceptualization of Islam should be such that when we think of Islam, we should concomitantly think of the meaningful exploration of the *self* with its associated components of self-awareness, of personhood, of identity, of the individual, of the collective, of the personality, of self-action…**Our received habits of conceptualizing Islam as discourses of prescription rather than as discourses of exploration have considerably obstructed us from recognizing the place of discourses of the Self as central to and constitutive of human and historical Islam**. Instead, these received conceptual habits continue to **constrain** us towards such representative misrepresentations as the following pre-emotively impoverishing conclusion of **Gustave von Grunebaum's** which, I suspect, is still shared by many: '**Islam is…not interested in the richest possible unfolding of man's potentialities, in that it never conceived of the forming of men as civilization's principal and most noble task**.'" (pp. 341-342)

Pre-Text(ual Revelation)
(pp. 343-356)

Ahmed's theory of **Pre-Text and Con-Text with respect to the explicit Text of Revelation** (the Qur'ān) is, in my view, the most significant contribution to both the field of Islamic Studies and also the field of the Study of Religion (and, I might add, an excellent way to *theologize* what philosophers and sufis are doing when they engage Divine Revelation). I would go so far as to say that it is the most important contribution in the book itself, or at least second to his corrective vis-à-vis the predominance of prescriptive discourse.

> "The key to conceptualizing Islam is to identify the *dynamic that renders things, despite their difference, mutually implicated in a shared process and relation of meaning*." (p. 344)

By "witnessing" oneself to God and God's prophet, one is constituting oneself with respect to Divine Revelation. When a **human agent attests to the existence of Divine Revelation, he or she determines, explicitly or implicitly, just what Divine Revelation really *is***. As such, Islam is a ***hermeneutical engagement***, "that is, [an] engagement by an actor or agent with a source or object of (potential) meaning in a way that ultimately *produces meaning for the actor* by way of the source." (p. 345)

Page 345 is thus stacked with principles taken from the 20th-century philosophical tradition of **hermeneutic phenomenology**, most importantly from the theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur (whom Ahmed explicitly cites later in the book, to be sure). "Hermeneutical engagement is, in other words, to *invest* one's Self in the making of meaning (that is, in the making of consequential truth), and concomitantly *to invest or attach that truth and meaning in the making of one's self*. It is to make one's Self *meaningful* in the terms of that hermeneutical engagement. The concept of hermeneutical engagement thus brings to the fore all of *source, method, truth, meaning, agency, self,* and *process*." (p. 345)

With what do Muslims engage, then? Revelation. **What is revelation?** The Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* literature. **What else?** Qur'ānic exegesis. **That's all?** No.

The Pre-Test of Revelation, defined:

1. "The act of Revelation of Muḥammad plus the product of text of Revelation to Muḥammad *does not encompass and is not co-extensive or consubstantial with* the full idea or phenomenon or reality of Revelation to Muḥammad." (p. 346)
2. "The Text of the Revelation requires as its premise an Unseen Reality or Truth that *lies beyond and behind the Text of the Revelation-in-the-Seen* and upon which the act, Text and truth of Revelation are contingent. This Unseen Reality is *ontologically prior to* and *alethically* (that is, as regards truth) *larger than* the textual product of the Revelation [=the Qur'ān]: it is the source of Revelation." (p. 346)
3. "The act and text of the Muḥammadan Revelation together represent a *single historical instance* and *enactment of this larger and prior dimension of the reality of Revelation*—which I will here term the *Pre-text* of Revelation." (pp. 346-347)

"*The Truth of the Text of the Revelation is only the Revelatory Product: as such, it is but an expression in the here-and-now of this world of the Truth of the Pre-Text of the Revelation.* That the Qur'ān/Text of the Revelation is true but does not encompass *all* the Truth of the Unseen Pre-Text of Revelation is accepted by all Muslims." (347) **e.g.,** Qur'ān 51:20-21 *al-Dhāriyāt*; 41:53 *Fuṣṣilat*; 31:27 *Luqmān*

> **How do Muslims, then, disagree?** The disagreement is over whether and how the Pre-Text of Revelation may be accessed. Can Pre-Text be accessed? Via the Text, or (only?) in the Text, or without the Text? (p. 347)

What is the Pre-Text?

Philosophers: Reason is the Pre-Text. (pp. 348-350)

- "Though the truth-statements of Pre-Text and Text may differ in their form to the point of apparent contradiction, *there is no essential difference and no semantic disconnect* between the truths of Pre-Text and Text: rather, they are connected in a hierarchical communicative continuum of (God's) Reason; they are both part-and-parcel of the logic and structure and reality of the meaning(s) of Revelation. Thus, they are all part-and-parcel of Islam—they are all Islamic." (p. 350)

Sufis: Existence (*wujūd*) is the Pre-Text (pp. 350-353)

- "Divine existence courses through the cosmos: the fact that the cosmos is the expression of the Truth/Divine Existence of the Pre-Text of Revelation means that the Truth of the Pre-Text is accessible in and *via* the cosmos by *existential* knowing of the cosmos, which is the process of experiential annexation by the individual of his/her limited material existence into the limitless Universal Divine Existence (the Pre-Text)." (p. 350)
- *kashf* via the Imagination from the Imaginal Wolrd (pp. 350-351)

***Fiqh**: "the hermeneutical engagement of the discursive project of Islamic* fiqh-*law is almost entirely a hermeneutical engagement with the Text*." (p. 353)

- Lawyers engage Textual-Reason; Philosophers engage Pre-Textual-Reason (p. 354)

Kalām: There is a Pre-Text, but the search for it is restricted to hermeneutical engagement with Text

- Textual statements are limited expressions of Truth of Pre-text, *bi-lā-kayf* (p. 355)

What is Islam?

"Human and historical *Islam is nothing other than the hermeneutical engagement with Revelation in all its dimensions and loci*—that is, *the hermeneutical engagement with the Revelatory Phenomenon comprising both Revelatory Premise and Revelatory Product*—which is to say (at this stage in the development of our thesis), *hermeneutical engagement with Revelation as Text and Pre-Text*. This

hermeneutical engagement takes place by a wide spectrum of means and produces a wide spectrum of meanings. Islam is the full array o these means and the full field of these meanings: it is *means and meanings*." (pp. 355-356)

Con-Text(ual Revelation)
(pp. 356-362)

***Context* is not Con-Text:** "*Con-Text of Revelation* is the body of meaning that is the product and outcome of previous hermeneutical engagement with Revelation. *Con-Text is, in other words, that whole field or complex or vocabulary of meanings of Revelation that have been produced in the course of the human and historical hermeneutical engagement with Revelation,* and which are thus *already present as Islam*." (p. 356)

Con-Text is not merely textual discourse, but discourse, practices, and material objects of any genre and "*in all their variety and contradiction*." Con-Text is the "human and historical bag-and-baggage of Revelation" and of Islam. (p. 357)

- historical vocabulary of Islam (p. 357)
- "The meanings of previous hermeneutical engagements are, in other words, discernibly embedded in the semantic units of this existing vocabulary of forms." (p. 357)
- "Con-Text supplies the *architectonics of meaning* or *the terms of Islam*" and, when one observes Con-Text in discourse, practices, and material objects, one recognizes it as "Islamic." (p. 357)

What is the relationship of Con-Text to Pre-Text and Text?

- "*Con-Text is, ultimately, genealogically traceable and semantically attributable to Text and/or Pre-Text* whence Con-Text has been elaborated." (p. 358)
- Ahmed goes on to suggest that **Con-Text, Pre-Text, and Text are in some sort of mutually (inter)dependent relationship**; you cannot engage one without the other, for all three "are inseparably enmeshed together to form the Revelatory matrix of Islam." (p. 359)
    - "*Text and Pre-Text are simply not available for hermeneutical engagement without Con-Text:* text and Pre-Text are semantically embedded in Con-Text; Con-Text constantly informs (in-forms) Text and Pre-Text. Quite simply, *a Muslim lives in Con-Text:* s/he lives in the complex of meanings that is the elaborated product of previous hermeneutical engagement with Revelation." (pp. 358-359)

I encourage you to take a look at footnote 131 on page 359: **How is "tradition" different from Con-Text?**

The **vocabulary of Islam** is a storehouse of words, objets, images, symbols, actions, and representations, each instantiation of which are both means for, meanings of, and meaningful to, the expression of the Islamic, explicitly or implicitly. When vocabulary such as, syllogism, *samāʿ*, a wine-cup, *jihād,* or Majnūn are employed in a discourse, practice, or object, the author or community is employing a meaning-making device and thereby "speaking Islamic." (pp. 359-361)

On the distinction between **Con-Text *in loco* and Con-Text *in toto***. That is, a Con-Text is variegated and differentiated among various contexts, to be sure. (p. 361) Nevertheless, to answer the question "What is Islam" we must have recourse to Con-Text *in toto*, since the question is implicitly "What is Islam *in toto?*". (p. 362)

What is the difference, in particular, between Con-Text and context? This needs to be fleshed out further, and I suggest beginning with footnote 133 on page 362.

Is mere engagement with the vocabulary of Islam an engagement with Con-Text and thus an Islamic engagement? This is a question I have, especially vis-à-vis my own work in comparative theology. But, what about other academic disciplines? If scholarship engages the vocabulary of Islam, does it make it "Islamic"? Indeed, there is a postcolonial and post-orientalist call for more indigenous and native conceptualizations of various religious, geographical, and historical contexts, i.e., for more emic theories and less etic ones, for less reliance in "theories and methods of religion" on 19th- and 20th-century Western academics and more reliance on native or indigenous sources in order to conceptualize a particular context of a religious tradition. **Is Ahmed's *What is Islam?* Islamic?**

What is Islam?
(p. 363)

"Human and historical Islam [is the] *hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation to Muḥammad*. Thus, when we conceptualize Islamic hermeneutics, we must do so in terms of all of *Pre-Textual hermeneutics, Textual hermeneutics, and Con-Textual hermeneutics*." In this way, we will be able to see "how contradictory statements and actions made by various claimants to Islam actually cohere meaningfully to their putative object—Islam—as well as to understand how Muslims are able to entertain and live with these contradictory statements and actions *as* Islam."

Spatiality of Revelation
(pp. 363-368)

> "To speak of Islam as hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muḥammad—meaning revelation as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text—is *necessarily* to speak of Islam in terms of *hermeneutical engagement with different spaces of Revelation,* and thus to speak of a *spatially-differentiated* origination, production, distribution and application of Truth and Meaning. *This spatiality and differentiation within Truth is structurally inherent in and constitute of Islam*." (p. 364)

A hermeneutical engagement with the threefold Divine Revelation necessarily involves a **mode or method implied by the Pre-Text** of a given discourse. This is what Ahmed calls differing "modes of production of truth" or varying *epistemologies*. (p. 364)

- **Philosophers** employ the logical syllogism of Reason, which is the Pre-Textual Revelation, in order to discover Revelation beyond the Text, but in and through the vocabulary of the Con-Text. (p. 364)
- **Sufis** employ the existential experience of body, mind, and spirit, given that the Pre-Textual Revelation is *wujūd*, or E/existence, in order to discover the Revelation beyond the Text, but in and through the vocabulary of the Con-Text. (p. 364)
- Their methods imply a training, or perhaps an election, that lead practitioners of either group to consider the meaning and truth discovered by their epistemologies perhaps to be unfit for the commonality, for "general human consumption." (p. 365)

Why is this important? Let us recall, despite the digression and my own fascination with this theory of Revelation, that the point of the book is to explain how there exists a coherent contradiction *within Islam*:

> "When we conceptualize Islam as *hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation to Muḥammad,* it becomes apparent that these contrary truth-meanings are not merely

> the result of external accidents and circumstantial vagaries that have impinged upon what would otherwise have been an uncorrupted and authentic hermeneutical engagement of Muslim subjects with Revelation." [**translation**: **contradiction does not occur because something secular or profane or cultural somehow caused the contradiction within the religious or sacred or Islamic-core/essence, or because of the banal fact that "subjectivities" vary**.] (p. 365)

Rather, **contradiction arises** within the domain of truth-meaning (i.e., there are mutually contradictory truths within the Islamic) **depending** on

(a) what aspect of Revelation is being primarily engaged (Pre-Text or Text or a bit of both) and
(b) what modes and epistemologies are at play within the domain of Con-Text (e.g., experience or reason, or combination thereof). (p. 365) Therefore, "contradictions are not merely *externally contingent*; rather, they are *structurally inherent*." (p. 366)

Ahmed then makes a very large and ambitious claim about the formation of the Muslim Self. What are your thoughts?

> "Thus, any individual who lives by making meaning for him/herSelf in terms of Islam as Revelation as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-text is concomitantly aware that he/she is making the Self in terms of Islam that both contain and *entertain* contradiction—that is to say, *in terms of Islam to which contradiction is inherent, and by which contradiction is made coherent. S/he is making her/himSelf meaningful in contradictory terms. The Self that is made in terms of such a process is thus, necessarily, a Self that has an intimate and profound relationship with and sensibility to contradiction—a Self that can live with contradiction*." (p. 366)

Ahmed argues that societies of Muslims live side-by-side in both internal and external contradiction, and that their capacity to do so is not the result of extrinsic social or cultural mechanisms or phenomena, but rather a result of "social and imaginal values and mechanisms" that are "a direct consequence of the inherent spatial dynamic of the infrastructure of Revelation—and, as such, are intrinsically and categorically Islam(ic)." (p. 367)

> **Islamic Truth and Meaning is generated in two main spatially-differentiated trajectories**:
> (i) hierarchy, and
> (ii) interiority/exteriority
> "which…are iterated and are operational in five domains of truth and meaning:" (see page 367)

Why is this important? Because hierarchy and interiority/exteriority (**read: *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir*!**) constitute and orient cosmology, existence, imagination, the body, the self, discourse, and society in terms of Islam. (p. 368)

Hierarchy
(pp. 368-377)

Cosmological hierarchy unfolds itself into epistemological hierarchy, which then transposes itself into social hierarchy. Society is thus organized in terms of classes, the members of which are ordered according to each individual's capacity *to know Truth*. (p. 368)

- Jalāl-ud-Dīn Davvānī's *Akhlāq-i Jalālī* (pp. 369-371)
- Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī's *Īqāẓ al-Nā'imīn* (p. 371)

- Sufi example: Khwājah ʿAbd-Allāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī's *Manāzil al-sā'irīn* (pp. 371-372)
- al-Ghazzālī's *Iljām al-ʿawām ʿa*n *ʿilm al-kalām* (p. 372)
- The Shīʿah, too, considered themselves the *khāṣṣah* (p. 373)
- Other sources, objects (pp. 373-374)
- Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* (pp. 374-375)

> "[This] notion of society and polity is neither discriminatory as regards fundamental public legal rights, nor does it posit any ontological difference between persons—since the distinguishing human quality is *knowledge*, which is something potentially susceptible to *acquisition* by all people by means of textual and experiential education (according to differential aptitude). Thus, this notion of the structure of society and polity, *which proceeds directly from the structure of Revelation,* **comprises values both of hierarchy and values of egalitarianism in a functioning concourse**." (p. 376)

Interiority and Exteriority
(pp. 377-386)

Spatiality of Revelation is also reflected in the spatiality of the cosmos: exteriority/Seen/***shāhādah*** vs. interiority/Unseen/***ghayb***

More important than the notions of the ***bāṭin*** and the ***ẓāhir*** that functioned to organize the interiority and exteriority, respectively, of a text or practice, is the ways in which **these concepts mapped out social spaces of public and private**, social spaces in which "divulging the secret" (*sirr*) was permitted or not (or, at least not advisable). (pp. 377-379)

> "The logic of Revelation necessitates, in other words, separate physical and social domains of *public*/Seen *physical and social space* and *private*/Unseen *physical and social space* as *differentiated spaces for* the social elaboration and operation of *spatially-differentiated truths and meanings*. This differentiation of Truth and Meaning in terms of what we can call *private and public discursive-performative space* or *private and public Truth-space* or *private and public meaning-making space* since these physical and social spaces are precisely *spaces for the social discourse and practice* of Truth and Meaning." (p. 379)

The act of meaning-making may then be personal, private, and public all at once.

> "I venture that most twenty-first century societies of Muslims are societies the prescriptive and monovalent nature of the canonical texts and practices of whose *paideia* does not allow for more than a narrow space for the entertainment of contradiction in terms of Islam. In other historical instances—such as, I venture, that of the historical Balkans-to-Bengal complex in the period 1350-1850—the space of exploratory contradiction is very large indeed and, as a practical matter, embraces a wide swath of society…One might say that such societies are characterized by more-or-less *open secrets*." (p. 381)

> **Contra Rudi Matthee**: "My point, however, is that the private-public divide is *not* a device or a 'concession' by which to 'connive' against the 'pretense' of the Islamic ideal: rather, *it is the conceptual and social enactment of the Islamic ideal as embedded in the inherent spatiality of Revelation.* The more-or-less *private discursive-performative and social space of contradiction* is called into existence and maintained as a social reality precisely so as to fulfill the existential need of

Muslims for *a theatre for the exploration and communication of the complex possibilities and dimensions of truth and meaning that arise necessarily from the phenomenon of Revelation*—possibilities of truth and meaning that Muslims explicitly recognize **might potentially disorder and destabilize the existential certitude and salvific prospects of society-at-large** where people are intellectually and temperamentally less well-educated, less well-prepared and less well-disposed *to live in contradiction*." **How is the BOLD in this excerpt different from typical notions of private/public space?**

"The law is squarely a public, objective, non-hierarchical and socially-actionable truth: it is squarely *a prescriptive project for the ordering of the domain of the Seen*; whereas philosophy and Sufism are, in different ways, *explorative projects for the apprehending of the domain of the Unseen*. Theology prescribes in public, and explores in private." (p. 384)

"To restate: this transposition of the spatiality of the Truth of revelation into public and private discursive space is *inherent* to the structural and social logic of Revelation-as-Pre-Text-and-Text; it is a necessary requirement for the social operation of the idea of higher and lower truths available to higher and lower knowers which is itself, as we have seen, inherent to the Revelatory structure." (p. 385)

- **By making the notion of public/private space intrinsic to his theory of the threefold Divine Revelation, Ahmed is explicitly distinguishing this notion of public and private space from the post-Enlightenment, secular notion of public space and private practice/belief. The existence of these two spaces is *part and parcel of doing and being Islam(ic)*.**

Discussion, thoughts: The post-Enlightenment, secular definition of egalitarianism forced scholars to view the public space as the normative space for all Muslims, common or elite, and thus to view the prescriptive discourses of the law to be normative of Islam. If Muslims "did otherwise" in private, that does not demand a re-formulation or re-conceptualization of what Islam *was*, because the private was necessarily independent from the public in the post-secular worldview. However, whereas in Europe the public was the domain for the common law of the nation-state (and all are *equal* in the eyes of the law, ideally), for the Muslim world the public was (considered to be by Orientalists) the domain for the common, religious law of the *sharʿīah*. As such, the public was normative, and the private was, well, merely so many subjectivities coming together to contravene the public law (just like the private, in secular Europe, was so many subjectivities coming together "to be religious").

Metaphor
(pp. 386-397)

Before proceeding, Ahmed reminds us that these various discourses and intellectual projects, i.e.., philosophy, theology, law, sufism, the *madhhab-i ʿishq*, et alia, were not hermetically sealed off from hermeneutical engagement with each other. Quite the contrary, they all had access to, and contributed to, the shared Con-Text of Revelation.

- In fact, anyone who has read Khaled El-Rouayheb's Islamic intellectual history exam list is well aware of how certain terms from the vocabulary of Islam were taken from one project, re-defined, and used in another project to give it a new meaning and to make it differently meaningful. His new book demonstrates some of this, too.

If contradiction is the is the *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* of the Islamic, then language needs to reflect this: "The fact that Revelation as a phenomenon comprises the structural

> spatiality of a truth-hierarchy that is both cosmological and social, as well as the structure of interiority/exteriority that transposes itself into private and public discursive space, as well as the spatiality of a vast lexicon of often contradictor truth-claims produced from a variety of hermeneutical engagements, *requires* that the language by which Muslims engage with, explore and communicate the meanings of Revelation should *necessarily* possess a suppleness, resourcefulness and multi-dimensionality—in short, a *semantic capacity*—suited to its complex task. My point is that, historically, Muslims did precisely produce and speak and communicate in such a language: they have produced and spoken and communicated in a language of ***metaphor*** and ***paradox***." (p. 389)
>
> **Ahmed makes a claim that is perhaps obvious to scholars of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Ottoman literature, but sometimes lost on scholars of Islamic Studies and the Study of Religion**: "I very much doubt that there is any community of discourse in the history of the world whose individual and collective language of self-exploration, self-expression and social communication—that is, whose language of individual and collective meaning-making—is as extensively, prolongedly, pervasively, and routinely ***metaphorized and paradoxical*** as is the literary idiom of Muslims…This rich **metaphorization and paradoxization is symptomatic**… as explorations and articulation of Islam; that is, as hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text." (pp. 389-390)

Metaphor was thus not merely a linguistic tool (though, it was this, to be sure), but it was treated as fact. Metaphor was real. Metaphor was literal.

How does Ahmed define metaphor? "Metaphor, by way of form, enables the generation of meaning beyond form…In metaphor, words are able to say something other than what they mean—or mean something other than what they say; they are able to reach beyond themselves." (pp. 390-391)

- **Citing al-Jurjāni**, the important function of the metaphor was the ***maʿnā al-maʿnā***, which "is that you comprehend a certain meaning from the expression, and this meaning leads you to another meaning." (p. 390)
- **Metaphor is not merely ornamental, aesthetic, or literary**, rather, it "functions as a means by which Muslims reach upwards, inwards, and outwards **beyond the form** of the word. It allows precisely for the *multi-dimensional exploration of meaning(s)*." (p. 391)

Metaphor, as defined by Ricœur, thus becomes the perfect linguistic medium by which to "**uphold a tensive view of reality**" which is the "**structure of the spatiality of Revelation**". (p. 392)

> "Metaphor and paradox are, in other words, of key semantic and existential significance to Muslims' meaning-making. We need, then, to take seriously Muslims' ***mode of saying*** (which are also ***modes of doing***) when we seek to understand Muslims' ***modes of being***…We need to understand that **metaphor and paradox are not merely *ornaments*; they are also *uses* (that is, *means*) and *meanings* of Islam**." (pp. 392-394)
>
> "Metaphor is not allegorical-symbolical language or code wherein words (or actions) stand in for other words with which they have no necessary semantic relationship, Rather, in metaphor, a word or action projects and assimilates semantically to another thing to which it stands in a semantic relationship of *simultaneous sameness and difference; from which thing and meaning it is differentiated at the very same time as with which it is identified*."

- I should add, since Ahmed cited p. 68 of Ricœur's *Interpretation Theory,* that the French hermeneutical philosopher goes on to add: "By this I mean that the **tension is not simply between words, but within the very copula of the metaphorical utterance…*Here 'is' signifies both is and is not***."

And so, it is not so much that Muslims used metaphor to convey some sort of meaning that was un-conveyable otherwise, but that this world *was* the metaphor: "The Seen world [of metaphor, i.e., *ʿālam al-majāz*] itself stands in relation to the Unseen world [of Real-Truth, i.e., *ʿālam al-ḥaqīqah*] as metaphor does to Truth. ***The Seen world is itself a metaphor***: it is the World of Metaphor the experience of which evokes and alludes to the Real-Truth of the Unseen world —the World of Real-Truth, the *ʿālam al-ḥaqīqah*. Real-Truth is *configured* and *delimited* in the forms of the Seen World: the True Meaning(s) of Real-Truth lie beyond and behind this configuration—by *means* of which Real-Truth may, nonetheless, be reached." (p. 394)

And, recalling the "is and is not" of the metaphorical copula: "In this spatial economy of Truth, the Seen world, in the one meaning, *corresponds* to the Unseen but, in the other meaning, *differs* from it: the forms of the Seen World are *informed* by Real-Truth, but are not the direct form of Real-Truth. Muslims engaging with the spatiality of Revelation thus lived in an intimate consciousness of and relationship with Truth characterized by *ambiguity of meaning* and *ambivalence of value*." (p. 396)

Paradox
(pp. 397-403)

"To be aware of the spatiality of Revelation is to exist in a Revelatory structure where the **Truths inherent to and arising in one space of Revelation both *are and are not* the Truths inherent to and arising in another space of Revelation**." (p. 397; once again recalling Ricœur's understanding of the metaphorical copula signifying "both is and is not"—even though Ahmed did not cite the sentence immediately following what he cites from *Interpretation Theory*).

When Muslims encounter contradiction, they can reject one truth-claim, both truth-claims, or make them "to *co-equate and co-exist as Islam, [whereby] Islam takes the form of paradox*." (p. 397)

- Footnote 197 gives further weight to Ahmed's **conceptualization of Islam as offering an explorative authority**. By speaking in metaphors rather than in literal predicative statements, **one is "creating a space for the generation, exploration, and production of meaning by communicative, experiential, and interpretative association, differentiation, and projection of the concept of [the vehicle[1]]**." (p. 397, footnote 197) Metaphor thus opens up the interpreter to **explorative possibilities**.
- If, then, the Seen World (*this world*) is a metaphor for the Unseen World, then the subject acting in this world is required to explore, interpret, communicate, discover, and journey in this world in search of the meaning of the Real-Truth of the Unseen.

[1] In the metaphor "Richard is a lion", "Richard" is the tenor, and "lion" is the vehicle". According to Ricœur, to interpret a metaphor, one has "to enumerate all of the appropriate senses in which the vehicle is 'seen as' the tenor." (p. 251, Ricœur, *Rule of Metaphor*; "seeing-as" = Wittgenstein) Let us recall the famous *ḥadīth* of *iḥsān*: *uʿbud allāh **ka-anna**ka tarā-hu* ("worship God **as though** you see Him").

> "**Paradox is perhaps *the* definitive conceptual device in the discourses of the Sufi-philosophical amalgam** of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex that engage with the fundamental dilemma of the incorrigible relationship that obtains in an emanations cosmology between transcendence and immanence." (p. 398)

Ahmed then follows with a serious of examples from the poetry of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex to illustrate his point (pp. 399-401), viz., that the "capacity to conceptualize Islam…in terms of paradox is, at once, symptomatic of and instrumental for the historically demonstrated capacity of Muslims to live with contradictory truths *as Islam*—that is, to *live* with *Islam as paradox*."(p. 401)

- **But the point is that these are not aberrant, exceptional, marginal and unpopular discourses, but typical, ordinary, central and popular discourses**. There is a "prolific scale at which and idiomatic virtuosity with which Muslims' literary discourse employ paradox." (p. 401)

Not paradox *in spite* of religion, but paradox *because* of religion:

- And so, when Keshavarz writes that Rumi, *despite* his religious conviction, accommodates paradox, Ahmed rebuts: "I respectfully submit that this precisely misses the point: it is *none other then* Rūmī's 'religious conviction'—Rūmī's *Islam*—that is the *source* and *cause* of his *need for* and *use of* paradox." (p. 402)

Three points:

(1) "In considering ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction, and Islam, we need to pay close attention to the specific and dominant forms of rhetoric that Muslims have used namely, metaphor and paradox;
(2) Metaphor and paradox serve not merely to *reconcile* but rather to make contradiction *meaningful*, and thus serve further as a means to *generate* and *retain* contradiction as something coherent with existence;
(3) It is not merely *social* goals that are fulfilled by metaphor and paradox, but *existential* ones." (pp. 402-403)

Conclusion
(pp. 403-404)

"To live with outright contradiction, as societies of Muslims historically have done, one must be able to conceive of contradiction in such a way that contradiction is coherent and meaningful in terms of one's paradigmatic values and truths." (p. 404)

> Divine Revelation as Pre-Text, Con-Text and Text
> + Hierarchy
> + Interiority/exteriority
> + varying sources of truth and meaning
> + varying epistemologies to produce truth and meaning
> + varying social locations (public/private, elite/common)
> + varying types of language (literal/metaphorical/paradoxical)
> = Islam conceptualized in terms of contradictory meaning-making, and Muslims living in those contradictory terms of Islam (p. 404)