What Is Islam?
Reading Group: Session One of Six
Chapter 1: Six Questions about Islam

"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…I am precisely *not* seeking to tell the reader what Islam is as a matter of Divine Command, and thus am *not* seeking to prescribe how Islam should be followed…Rather, I seek to tell the reader what Islam has actually been as a matter of human fact in history, and thus am suggesting how Islam should be *conceptualized* as a means to a more meaningful understanding both of Islam in the human experience, and thus of the human experience at large." (pp. 5-6)

What are the six questions?
(or, *problématiques*)

1. **Philosophy**, viz., the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) and his commentators, which philosophy informed and shaped Islamic theology to such an extent that it effectively "defined God for Muslims" (pp. 10-19)
2. **Sufism**, viz., the practical and experiential epistemology and hermeneutics which they proffered and to which they adhered (pp. 19-26)
3. **Illuminationism,** i.e., the *ḥikmat al-ishrāq* of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), and the **Akbarian Tradition**, i.e., the school of thought inaugurated by Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), particularly the hierarchical vision of the cosmos in which the boundary between Divine transcendence and immanence is explicitly destabilized (pp. 26-31)
   a. characterized by the "*Sufi-philosophical amalgam*" (p. 31)
4. The ***Dīvān* of** Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥammad **Ḥāfiẓ** Shīrāzī (d. *circa* 1390), viz., the poeticization and metaphorization of the historical *being* of Muslims in terms of ambiguity, ambivalence, love (from the carnal to the spiritual, nay, the carnally-spiritual and spiritually-carnal?), and an epistemology of love. (pp. 32-46)
5. **Islamic Art**, viz., the way it problematizes the distinction between "religion and culture" or "the religious and the secular", and how Islamic Art (financially patronized by political and cultural elites), which adopted the Sufi-philosophical amalgam, and thereby assumed the norm of finding higher-wordly *meaning* in *form*, is often understood only within and through the revelatory sources of Islam (i.e., Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*) (pp. 46-57)
6. **Wine and wine drinking**, viz., the positive meaning and valorization of wine drinking in non-legal discourses and contexts, e.g., medical texts, poetry, social gatherings, ethics, ceramics, which meaning and valorization are imbued and inscribed with the revelatory sources of Islam (i.e., Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*) (pp. 57-61)

There is an incoherence between Islam as theoretical object or analytical category and Islam as real historical phenomena. How do we conceptualize the relationship between the category "Islamic" and the foregoing questions (which are historical facts vis-à-vis Islam)?

Why were *these* six questions posed?

These discourses not only stand outside scriptural-legal discourses, but are also in many ways in diametrical contradiction thereto. How has scriptural-legal discourse managed to restrict "the Islamic"?

- Orientalist discourse
- Modern Muslim discourses of reform and revival
- Contemporary and current discourse
- Comparative religion discourse
- Interreligious discourse
- Protestant discourse
- Islamophobic discourse
- Popular discourse (media)
- Well-intentioned, non-Muslim, (inter)religious discourse

Internal contradiction, normative and formative of popular discourse (the *ʿawām* and *khawāṣṣ* distinction), collapsing the religion-secular/-culture divide (pp. 72-73)

The aim is thus to reorient "the Islamic" and to provide not only a new vocabulary, but a new map to (re)conceptualize *what is Islam*.

The "Balkans-to-Bengal Complex"

The temporal period and geographic location of study, wherein all of the foregoing discourses and practices were endemic.

1350-1850, "from the Balkans through Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia down and across Afghanistan and North India to the Bay of Bengal." (pp. 73-85)

- Why was this period and region selected? Criticisms of such a selection?
- ***Paideia:*** "This discourse of self-conceptualization and self-articulation is the poetical and narrative tradition to which the concepts and vocabularies of the abovementioned Ibn Sīnā, Rūmī, Ibn ʿArabī, Ṭūsī, Ḥāfiẓ,…[and other authors who also wrote in Persian and who popularized the *madhhab-i ʿishq*, or Way/School of Love]…—were *foundational* and *seminal*. **Their canonical discourses constituted the *paideia* and, thus, the larger modes of thinking and the communicative idiom of the Muslims of this space and age**—and as such, constituted an integral element in *the hermeneutics of Islam* of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex." (p. 80)

- ➡ Let us look to other spaces and times in which there existed a certain *paideia*. In what ways did or did not these corpora constitute the formative mode of thinking for the populace?
  - The culture of ancient Greece (source of the word, of course)
  - Liberal arts in Medieval Europe
  - The Classics studied in the West by all high school educated individuals (e.g., the works of Homer to the works of Virgil, among others, Biblical texts, etc.)
  - Other contexts?
- Both Muslim and non-Muslim moderns tend to marginalize this complex when conceptualizing the Islamic (pp. 82-83).
- What do we make of the linguistic situation of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, and how does it render it unique compared to other social, cultural, and temporal contexts outside of the Islamic? (Europe, Southeast and East Asia, Africa, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.)
  - Persian! (p. 84-85)

The Elitism Criticism

- The discussion concerning whether or not these discourses were *elite* discourses spans pages 85-97, and has forever been the bane of the study of the Islamic, whether that study be religious, intellectual, anthropological, or social. How does Ahmed address this predicament?
- Looking at the poem and Ahmed's comments thereon (pp. 88-90): what do we make of the recitation-vs.-comprehension question? How do we, as scholars, assess whether popular recitation constitutes popular comprehension and is this even a valid or useful question?

"Most people did/do not learn (or, at least, were/are not introduced to) the ideas and vocabulary of *waḥdat al-wujūd* or *ḥikmat al-ishrāq* by studying directly the texts of Ibn ʿArabī or Suhrawardī; rather they learn/ed these values, methods, and truth-claims **from attendance of poetic-musical performances and from literary iteration**." (p. 91)

"The idea of the cosmic economy of *barakah* proceeds directly from the Neo-Platonic logic of emanation that underpins the Avicennan cosmos—indeed, an ordinary Muslim's *ziyārah* to obtain the *barakah* that emanates from the tomb of a Sufi in a village or mountain pass in Morocco, India or Indonesia is precisely **a *de facto* acknowledgement of and active participation in a cosmos organized and structured and experienced in neo-Platonic, Avicennan, and Akbarian terms**." (p. 92)

- It appears that the sheer amount of texts by "jurisprudential elites" (p. 93) aiming to restrict, correct, and discipline the practices and beliefs of "uneducated and illiterate Muslims" (p. 93) is itself proof that such beliefs and practices *were* in fact the norm and valorized. Rather than the prescriptive discourse of the law being the normative and authoritative discourse, as has often been assumed in scholarship, it may very well be the other way around. (p. 94)
- Valorization as positive and meaningful acts (p. 97)

The Qur'ān and Revelation

- How do we understand a given discourse's subjection of the Qur'ān to the Truth-matrix elaborated and constructed by said discourse? (pp. 97-101)
- What is the place of the Qur'ānic revelation in these discourses, and how might this conceptualization expand (the Muslim and non-Muslim) scholar's understanding of "revelation"?

"Coherent Contradiction"

- In the remaining pages of the chapter (pp. 101-109) Ahmed develops his concept of "coherent contradiction".

"In the present instance…we stand in need of a **etic/historians' category** that is external to Muslims' categorizations of Islam, in so far as it is not the same as any one such categorization (since some Muslims' conceptualizations of Islam differ from others) but that also coherently comprises and expresses the relationship of all **emic/actors' categories** to the larger category at stake (and thus to each other)—which is the category and phenomenon "Islam" with which all actors identify and affiliate their actions and themselves. In other words, to answer the question "What is Islam?," **we really stand in need of an etic/historians' conceptualization of Islam that also functions satisfactorily as a "pan-emic" conceptualization in spite of—indeed, *because of*—the disagreements of Muslims actors**." (p. 106)

- The important act of naming the Islamic (p. 107): a political and authoritative act of valorization that establishes normative value on the object

"My goal in this book is to provide *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)

"The main difficulty in conceptualizing Islam/Islamic lies in the *prolific scale* of contradiction between the ideas, values and practices that claim normative affiliation with "Islam"—which poses the demanding problem of how to locate *the coherence of an internally-contradictory phenomenon*. […] We are confronted with a range of apparently *contradictory* and mutually *non-commensurate* statements and actions—whether that *apparent* contradiction is between doctrine and doctrine, doctrine and practice, or practice and practice—all of which claim, to their own satisfaction, to be representative of and integral to a putative object, "Islam." […] My goal is precisely to formulate a conceptualization of Islam as theoretical object that, by identifying the coherent dynamic of internal contradiction, enables us to comprehend the integrity and identity of the historical and human phenomenon at play." (p. 109)

- For the study of religion scholars, how might this project, viz., of conceptualizing "coherent contradiction" within Islam, bear fruit in other areas, other discursive traditions, other religious traditions? Are there parallels? Is Islam unique?