What Is Islam?
Reading Group: Session Seven of SEVEN (because Shahab!)
Chapter 6: Applications and Implications
Coherent Contradiction, Exploration, Diffusion, Form and Meaning, Modern

In my view, a key Study-of-Religion takeaway from Chapter 5 (as opposed to the many Islamic-Studies-specific takeaways, such as the concepts of Pre-Text and Con-Text, the centrality of metaphor, poetry, and paradox in Muslim societies, etc.) was the following, summarized in the Chapter 5 handout:

> 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 *religiously* normative, and the private was, well, merely so many subjectivities coming together to contravene the public (religious) law (just like the private, in secular Europe, was so many subjectivities coming together "to be religious").

In other words, Ahmed has argued that the source of coherent contradiction must be found *within the Islamic process for the construction and production of truth, value, and meaning—for meaning-making*—and not in some secular, cultural, "non-Islamic" ideology, philosophy, etc., imposed upon "the Islamic way of life." He argues this in his turn to paradox, metaphor, poetry, hierarchy, and the spatiality of revelation.

Conclusion of Chapter 5
(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)

In the final chapter, Ahmed explicates the applications and implications of Islam conceptualized in terms of *coherent contradiction*, which is made possible by understanding Islam as *meaning-making in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muḥammad as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text.*

Coherent Contradiction and the Authority to Explore
(pp. 405-408)

Ahmed declares what a society *is* when Islam as hermeneutical engagement with Revelation is at play:

> "It is a society in which the Truth of Revelation/Islam is conceived as a limitless Reality whose meanings are susceptible to and available for *exploration*, and not merely as the limited and limiting reality of prescription." (p. 406)

> "It is a society in which the metaphorical truth of this world is conceived as the bridge to the Real-Truth: a bridge on which one is forever crossing back and forth in the act of meaning-making." (p. 406)

In other words, an **Islamic society is one in which people *explore* and *express* potential meanings of Truth**.

> "The respective subject of each of our diagnostic questions in Chapter 1 now emerges **not** as an instance of a problem *anomalous* to Islam, but rather as an expression of meaning *constitutive and definitive* of Islam." (p. 406)

"Islamic norms" should no longer be sought in disciplinary isolation, or in some sacred/religious category as opposed to the profane/secular one; rather, they should be sought in the hermeneutical engagement enacted by Muslims *as Muslims*.

What is Islamic about Islamic Art? or, How is Islamic Art *Islamic*?
(pp. 408-424)

If we apply Ahmed's re-conceptualization of Islam as hermeneutical engagement, then we must rephrase these questions:

> "How is this art made valuable or meaningful in terms that arise from the hermeneutical engagement with Revelation as one or more of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text?…What does this art object mean in terms of Islam (and, thus, *how* does it mean)?…[and so on]" (p. 409)

Another way of understanding how we analyze Islamic art is to ask *what additional meaning, value, and truth emerges when we understand the object in terms of various meanings, values, and Truth(s) available to us in Pre-Text, Con-Text, and Text.* **In other words, something *new* emerges from the object when this is done, something that would have otherwise remained hidden to us if analyzed as a mere secular or cultural or profane *appendage* to some putative *core* or *essence* of Islam**.

How is a wine-cup *Islamic*? And, how is it Islamic *because of its function as a container for the alcoholic beverage made of fermented grapes,* not despite this fact?

How is the work of art *Humāy and Humāyūn in a garden* Islamic? Because meaning, value, and truth is discovered (revealed) when it is contemplated through the hermeneutical lens of the *madhhab-i ʿishq*. In this society, *love has a particular meaning and value* constituted by the Pre-Text and Con-Text and Text of Revelation. (pp. 410-415)

> If original audience was not fully aware of the following, then the artist would have wasted his time (if this seems obvious, see the assessment by Robert Irwin of this same piece on p. 410!):
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> "Understanding very well the language of this figure—of this figural language—the audience of the painting were able to pass from the figure and go on to its meaning in terms of Islam. The Islamic meaning is articulated by the painting's explorative hermeneutical engagement with the full matrix of Revelation: with **Pre-Text** (expressed in the relationship between the figure/*majāz*/Seen and the meaning/real-truth/*ḥaqīqat*/Unseen that lies beyond the figure), with **Text** (the allusion to "There is nothing like His likeness" [Qur'ān *al-shūrā* 42:11]), and with **Con-Text** (Majnūn and Laylā—who would later be joined as elements of Con-Text by Humāy and Humāyūn). In committing itself to the process of meaning-making by hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, *Humāy and Humāyūn in a Garden* is unmistakably and meaningfully (and beautifully) *Islamic art*." (pp. 413-414)

On the transformation of quotidian objects of utility into intimate objects of Islamic meaning: The beautification (ornamentation) of these otherwise banal objects infuses them with Islamic meaning, value, and Truth in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Pre-, Con-, and Text. They have *higher value* now than what is superficially observed but also *through* what is witnessed and contemplated in this Seen world. (p. 415-416)

Ḥāfiẓ's poetry, wine, and the miniature painting by Sulṭān Muḥammad (pp. 417-424)

> The careful and nuanced analysis of this painting may be summed up with the following: "The act of wine-drinking in the Seen World is *related* and *connected* to the Other World: *in the act,* earthly wine-drinkers are entering into that relation and enacting that connection—that *meaningful co-relation*—of Seen to Unseen, of wine to wine (one might say that the earthly wine-drinkers are enacting the immortal phrase of Matthew 6:10 "in earth, *as it is* in heaven.")…The lower, rea, material, everyday wine of the Seen world is, in other words, *transporting* and *transforming* the drinkers upwards towards *(altered) consciousness, knowledge* and *experience* of the higher, Real, ideal, eternal Wine of the Unseen world…*Wine is a means to meaning that is diffused throughout the canvas of the cosmos:* the same act of meaning-making is taking place on earth and in heaven and in-between." (pp. 422-423)
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> And, I would add that it is **Ḥāfiẓ the poet who is in-between** the Seen and Unseen World (the middle plane of the miniature), acting as role of mediator between the two, as the *lisān al-ghayb* ("tongue of the Unseen").
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> "The painting expresses perfectly the axiom *al-majāz qanṭarat al-ḥaqīqah*: "Metaphor is a bridge of Real-Truth." (p. 423)

Most importantly: "The obvious paradox lies, of course, in the fact that a *figural painting* about *wine*—that is, the expression of two practices proscribed by the law—serves here to instruct Muslims as a means to the meaning of the Truth. Both painting and wine-drinking are made meaningful here in terms of Islam—and Islam is made meaningful in terms of painting and wine-drinking. The painting is itself a perfect paradoxical answer to the question *What is Islam?*" (p. 424)

On Islamic Music
(pp. 424-430)

It is unnecessary to go into details, but Ahmed interprets three Arabic couplets by Amīr Khusraw in such a way that it become apparent **they cannot be meaningfully understood without the key vocabulary of Islam**: the resurrection, verses from the Qur'ān, etc. "The *experience* and *meaning* of music for a Muslim is valorized and expressed in unmistakably and *uniquely Islamic* terms." (p. 428)

> "Musical audition is thus transportation to unconscious audition of the sound and Truth of Divine Speech" (p. 428)

Again, this method of interpretation may seem entirely obvious so some (or not?), but it must be borne in mind that this is an **intervention by Ahmed into the field of Islamic Studies and the Study of Religion**. The predominant scholarly (and "modern Muslim") assumption has been to take as normative the many *ḥadīth*s proscribing music, *contrary to the social and historical phenomenon of Islam*, wherein music was valorized and made meaningful in terms of Islam:

> "It is this preponderantly prohibitory stance of the juridical discourse that led the musicologist, Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, to speak of the 'paradox [that] arises from the discrepancy between theory—the unfavorable attitude of Islam towards music—and practice—the existence of music as an almost indispensable part of Islamic social life'—a contradictory circumstance which she characterized as 'the complementary opposition of music and religion.'" (p. 429)

Rather, Ahmed demonstrates that "[Amīr Khusraw's] couplets on music constitute and make normative statements that are at once philosophy, Sufism, theology, Qur'ānic exegesis and law—[they] are blended and amalgamated to *explore and generate meaning for the self in music in terms of Islam*." (p. 430)

Science, Natural Science, Philosophy, and Reason
(pp. 430-435)

The repeat the refrain: post-Enlightenment, secular modernity has presumed the claim that "the religious" is contrary to "science". Religion is faith in some unverifiable, irrational object(s), and science is the observation of fact in terms of variable date and rational methods (see the proliferation of "science and religion" discourses, classes, conferences, projects, articles, and media). Not so for the Muslim philosopher, whom today might be called a "natural scientist", according to Ahmed.

(of course, this applies to other religious traditions, though perhaps not in the way *modern, popular discourse* presents religion—see the 19th- and 20th-century debates between science and religion that would seem foreign to pre-modern intellectuals[1])

> "The Muslim natural scientist seeks, through reason, to adduce Divine Truth directly from its enactment and employment in the phenomena of the cosmos beyond the text. By harnessing and applying human reason (*ʿaql*), natural scientists detect the workings of Divine Reason—which the twelfth-century rationalist Ḥāmid al-Balkhī called 'the organizing intellect [*ʿaql-i mudabbir*] by the execution of which the constellations are raised up and the earth set in place.' Human reason is the means by which natural scientists access the Divine Truth of the Unseen as it lies behind and is enacted in the Seen of Nature." (p. 431)

Ahmed then brings the example of Niẓām al-Dīn al-Nīsābūrī (d. 1328) in order to contend the following:

> "'The parallel (or even the identity) between the revelation of the Qur'ān and the revelation of the universe' are being accessed by one and the same slim scientist, and are put by him into one and the same conversation about the one and the same commodity—Divine Truth. Indeed, the language of 'religious' and 'scientific' here gets in the way of understanding what Niẓām al-Dīn al-Nīsābūrī is doing: **he is not doing 'science' and 'religion', but rather he is seeking knowledge of Divine Truth as found in Pre-Text and Text of Revelation**." (p. 432)

> "In short, the natural sciences should be seen in the history of societies of Muslims as a project of hermeneutical engagement with the Pre-Text of Revelation whose logic and Truth-product was consonant and resonant with other rational and Pre-Textual projects, and whose vocabulary was available in Con-Text as a part and parcel of the means of meaning-making by Muslims in terms of Islam." (p. 434)

The Islamic Non-Muslim?
(pp. 435-452)

In this section, we must take care to distinguish the various ways adjectives are employed in speech. **Adjectives** are intended to be ***descriptive***, and yet more often than not when it comes to **religions** (or any **ideology**), **adjectives** are understood to be **causative** of the noun, movement, action, etc., they are describing. In what ways are the adjectives below understood as descriptive and/or as causative? Is the poetry caused by some "Persian-ness"? Is it caused by "Islam"? The same may be asked of the adjectives "Arab" and "Islamic". This may just be my own view, but I contend that we often

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[1] A great example of this is the myth of the flat earth, i.e., the myth that pre-modern Europe thought the earth was flat. That the earth is flat is not the myth; that people *thought* the earth was flat is the modern myth! (Russell, Jeffrey Burton (1991), *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and modern historians*, New York: Praeger). Or, the modern creationism movement in Christianity, which contradicts the earliest Christians: e.g., **Origen**: "For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, and moon, and stars? And that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? **And who is so foolish** as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden…**I do not suppose that anyone doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and not literally.**" Or, **Augustine**: "It not infrequently happens that something about the earth, about the sky, about other elements of this world…**may be known with the greatest certainty by reasoning or by experience, even by one who is not a Christian**. **It is too disgraceful and ruinous, though, and greatly to be avoided, that he [the non-Christian] should hear a Christian speaking so idiotically on these matters, and as if in accord with Christian writings, that he might say that he could scarcely keep from laughing when he saw how totally in error they are**."

understand "Islamic" (and Christian, and Buddhist, etc.) in *causative terms* rather than in *descriptive terms*.

> Persian poetry has a rich and complex history.
> Islamic poetry is beautiful.
> The Arab political revolution is succeeding in collapsing dictatorial regimes.
> The Islamic revolution is gaining momentum.

On Islamic, Greek thought: "To the (*prodigious*) extent to which, and particular mode in which, Aristotle, whom the Muslim philosophers called the 'First Teacher,' and Plato, whom they called the 'Divine Plato [*aflāṭūn-i ilāhī*],' are made meaningful (and necessary) in the Muslim hermeneutical engagement with the Truth of Revelation, it is *meaningful* and *necessary* to characterize both these foundational figures as *Islamic*. It is not merely appropriate but is *meaningful* and *necessary* to say *Aristotle is Islamic* and *Plato is Islamic*—which means that Aristotle and Plato are made meaningful by and have particular meaning in the Muslim hermeneutical engagement with Revelation. It is equally necessary to speak of 'Islamic Aristotle' and 'Islamic Plato' as meaning that there are elements of Plato and Aristotle that are *not* made meaningful by and in the slim hermeneutical engagement with Revelation." (p. 436)

> **Arisṭū and Aflāṭūn are Islamic**: "That Aristotle and Plato were not *Muslims* is simply irrelevant to their meaningful designation as *Islamic*. Muslims identified the ideas of the First Teacher and the Divine Plato as instances in the world of the T/truth of the Pre-Text—rather in the same manner that they identified the laws of nature as God's laws—and took them up as *means to meaning* in terms of Islam. To say that Islamic thought is Neo-Platonic is to say that Neo-Platonic thought is made, by Muslims, part and parcel *of Islam*." (p. 437)

The Persian epic poem, the *Shāhnāmah* of Firdawsī (d. 1020): Islamic, because it became the exemplary epic of kingship for the Muslim rulers of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. (see the argument for this, a quite nuanced and perspicacious one, on pp. 438-444)

> "The pre-Islamic models of rulership are *Islamic* Con-Text." (p. 444)

This question is of particular interest to me, as a *Christian* comparative theologian who reads *Islamic* texts for the sake of elucidating my own faith in acts of constructive and systematic *Christian* theology: "What are we to do, however, with the reverse case: which is to say, how do we designate the non-Muslim actor who takes up units of meaning from the field of meaning of Islam and incorporates them into his existence *but remains a non-Muslim*?" (p. 444)

Ahmed offers the example of the Sikh wrester's battle cry: *Yā ʿAlī*!: I suggest we turn to p. 445, and read from just below the middle ("At the moment when the wrestler…") to the end of that paragraph at the top of p. 446.

> In sum: "the Sikh wrestler *gives meaning to his Self by this engagement with the Con-Text of the Revelation of Islam*. In this moment, the Sikh wrestler is not a Muslim but he has *committed himself to meaning-making in terms of Islam*. His act is *precisely* an Islamic act—it is *meaningful in terms of Islam*." (p. 445)

> "It is the *commitment of the self to the main of meaning in terms of the hermeneutical engagement with the Revelation of Islam* that makes the action of the non-Muslim actor *Islamic*." (p. 446)

So, my act of comparative theology may be [self-]confessionally Christian, but hermeneutically Islamic (and Christian).

Or, take the example of **the adoption of Islamic dress, and the removing of Brahmanic dress, by members of the fifteenth-century court of the South Indian kingdom of Vijayanagar**: previous scholars considered it merely **cultural and politically expedient to do this ("political strategy").** Ahmed instead argues that the court entered into the Islamic field of meaning, and the act of removing Brahmanic dress and putting on Islamic dress is an act made meaningful in terms of Islam, *despite their remaining non-Muslims*. (pp. 446-447)

Now, on to Jewish thought by Jews embedded in Muslims societies, who lived and *flourished* "in an environment of meaning saturated by Islam." (p. 447)

> "If the concerns of Jewish theology in this period were informed and shaped by the Islamic Con-Text ("determined by issues raised in the context of Islamic thought"[2]) to the point that they took the same fundamental forms and asked the same fundamental questions such that **in order to understand the *meaning* of Jewish theology one needs to understand the Islamic Con-Text**, then why not call these processes wherein Jews are making Judaism meaningful for themselves in terms of Islam "**Islamic Jewish thought**"—which would seem to be a more meaningful designation than any other we have? As I noted in Chapter 2, we have no difficulty terming Islamic philosophy Neo-Platonic (and not Neo-Platonic-ate); it seems that the only consideration that might restrain us from calling Maimonides an Islamic Jewish thinker is **our ingrained scruples (if not horror) about qualifying one 'religious' category by another—as if to do so is somehow a violation of the necessary *integrity* of a 'religious' category**. But if we put aside the category of 'religion' and focus on *meaning*, then 'Islamic Jewish' is, straightforwardly and without prejudice, the most *meaningful* term." (pp. 448-449)

> "Thus, *whether or not an actor is Muslim is irrelevant to the matter of whether or not the act or the product of the act is Islamic*. What matters is the means to meaning—and the commitment of the self to that meaning; what matters in the case of the non-Muslim is *hermeneutical engagement* with Con-Text of Revelation to Muḥammad. It is that hermeneutical engagement with Revelation that makes the act of the non-Muslim *Islamic*." (p. 449)

What about the act of a non-Muslim scholar of Islam who engages with Text and Con-Text to produce scholarship about Islam. Is this process Islamic? (p. 450). Ahmed seems to say that the product of the scholar is Islamic if it is taken up by Muslims in the act of meaning-making to make normative statements about Islam.

> **I admit that I am not totally convinced by this**. Somehow, Ahmed has snuck "normative claims" back into the process. If (a) scholar (or architect, or manufacturer) is non-Muslim, and (b) does not make meaning for his or her self in terms of Pre-, Con-, or Text, but, (c) Muslims find meaning in product, then product is Islamic. But, what about the process?

[2] Correcting for the citation, which is from Kraemer, Joel L. "The Islamic Context of Medieval Jewish Philosophy".

> **Or**: if (a) scholar is non-Muslim, but, (b) makes meaning for self in terms of Pre-, Con-, or Text, then process is Islamic (comparative theology?).
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> **What other permutations are there?**

On Syncretism and "Blending": pp. 450-452—in short, *let's no longer use these terms!*

And now we finally come to the most *popular* subject matter: Islamic violence or Islamic terrorism: Ahmed spends just two short paragraphs on this topic (p. 452). In brief, this is where Ahmed explicitly mentions that the term "Islamic" does not mean that Islam *causes* violence. It does, however, mean that the Muslim actor makes meaning of violence in terms of Pre-, Con-, and Text of Revelation. Just as we may rightfully and appropriately say "Islamic violence", we may likewise say "democratic violence" and "national violence" when nation-states make meaning of violence in terms of democracy and the protection of the nation-state. Or, we may say "American violence". In all cases, it does not necessarily mean that "democracy" causes violence or that some "America" causes violence.

Islamic Law, *fiqh*, *sharʿīah*, *siyāsah* and *qānūn* (ruler's law) (pp. 453-482)

In this lengthy section, Ahmed demands that we abandon the analytical habit of finding *both* normative claims *and* the possibility of normative pluralism (*ikhtilāf*) within the discourse of *fiqh* scholars *alone*.

> "As we have seen, the sources of normative pluralism in human and historical Islam lie, in the first instance, far beyond, behind and above the law—they are located int the very spatial-structural logic of Divine Revelation as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text. The hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-text of Revelation generates *varied and contradictory normative truths* through a far broader range of trajectories and apparatuses and epistemologies than those of the *fiqh* scholars alone." (pp. 453-454)

We need to understand the spatiality of revelation and the fact that **there are spaces of Islamic existence besides the spaces of the law, in both thought and practice**. Rather than term these spaces and discourses "antinomian", as has often been the case, Ahmed prefers "the terms 'para-nomian' and 'supra-nomia' so as to emphasize that this stance does not necessarily place itself so much *against* the law as it does *beside, beyond,* and *above* law." (p. 454)

> The dominant tendency is still to understand Islamic law in terms of the discourse of the *fuqahāʾ*-jurisprudents and thus as scriptural hermeneutics. (p. 455) But let us recall the *fatwā* of Ebü-s-Süʿūd on the Sufis who dive into the bottomless and limitless ocean of the Real-Truth of God.

In this section, Ahmed is not so much asking us to abandon Islamic law as a valid discourse for the conceptualization of Islamic norms; rather, he is now asking us to *re-conceptualize Islamic Law*:

> "*What might the effects be for our understanding if we were to conceptualize Islamic law not only in the strictly legal discourses of the jurists, but in the broader hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text in the social and discursive diffusion of Truth in societies of Muslims?*" (p. 456)

The distinction between *sharʿīah* and *fiqh*, on the one hand, and *siyāsah* and *qānūn*, on the other:

> "It has only recently begun to be recognized by historians that a great deal of the law that was historically produced and applied in societies of Muslims—especially (but not only) in the major domains of administrative law (including the laws that administers the legal system itself), land law, and criminal law—has, in fact, been 'ruler's law', that is *siyāsah* or *qānūn*, rather than 'jurists' law' or *fiqh* or *sharʿīah*…[The former laws were] made by Sultans in their palaces rather than by *fuqahā'* in their *madrasahs*. *Siyāsah* or *qānūn* law tended, historically, as a practical business, *not* to be made by *fuqahā'* using the methodology of *uṣūl al-fiqh*-jurisprudence that proceeds from scriptural hermeneutics." (p. 457) Instead, reason, ethical tradition, community experience and custom were the sources.

Yet, scholars tended to claim that this law (*siyāsah* or *qānūn*) was **merely "secular state law"**. But this is patently *not* how it was conceptualized by Muslims. (and how is this different from the complete adoption of Byzantine and Sassanian imperial law and local custom by the earliest Caliphate?) (pp. 458-459)

> We thus need to ask how *ruler's law was Islamic*. "A growing body of scholarly literature has recently begun to recognize that, as a *practical matter,* ruler's law and jurists' law were (somehow) viewed by Muslims as an integrated functioning systemic entity." (p. 459)

> On the *fiqh-siyāsah* framework (pp. 459-460)

> "It is highly significant that probably the single action of most far-reaching consequence for legal doctrine in the history of Islam was not the act of a jurist or collection of jurists, but was a Sultanic initiative…Baybars' Sultanic legal reform [in 1265] led rapidly, in interaction with other institutional changes, to the creation of a normative legal culture where the jurists of the four Sunni *madhhab*s of *fiqh* came to accept—*as a matter of law*—the validity of each other's respective legal rulings *even when those rulings were in outright disagreement*. **The plural orthodoxy of jurists' law owes its historical institutionalization to the intervention of Sultanic law**." (p. 461)

But how did Muslims do this? How is this mutual co-dependence between *fiqh* and Sultanic law understood in terms of *Islam*? On what *Islamic* conceptual basis did Muslims and Muslim society readily admit and accept the *fiqh-siyāsah* framework? We cannot find answers to these questions from within the methods and terms of *uṣūl al-fiqh*.

> "We *will* find the answer to this fundamental legal question readily enough in a *non-legal* genre: namely, the philosophically-inflected discourse of ***akhlāq*-ethics**." (p. 462)

First, Ahmed looks at Ṭūsī's *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* (pp. 462-466) and concludes the following:

> "Government [*siyāsah*], as Ṭūsī makes clear, is about *management* [*tadbīr*]. The function of that management is to bring about a state of affairs where each person obtains and is content with his rights—that is to say, a state of *justice*. If that government/management is in accord with Wisdom/*ḥikmat* it is called Divine Government; that is, the Divine *is* Wisdom/*ḥikmat*. Government/management in accordance with the Divine Wisdom produces the perfect state." (p. 466)

Second, Ahmed turns to Davvānī's *Akhlāq-i Jalālī* (pp. 467-471) and concludes the following:

> "**First**: the law-making function of the Sultan—what we might call the legal brief of God's Shadow, God's Caliph, and Deputy of the Prophet—is as broad and extensive as could be conceived. Certainly, the Sultan's law-making function loses nothing in comparison to that which students of Islamic law are accustomed to assign to the *fuqahā'*-jurisprudents. Indeed, in one sense the Sultan's legal function is effectively the same as that of the *fuqahā'*-jurisprudents: it is to make specific law in accordance with the principles of the *shar'īah.* The difference here is the criteria and considerations that underpin and inform the Sultan's law-making projects: the Sultan's defining consideration is to 'perfect individual human beings and to order their collective welfare.' The Sultan is, in other words, less concerned with the letter of the received law (which, the implication is, may or may not meet the needs of the welfare of society in the given time and circumstance) than he is with effecting the purpose of the law, which is precisely to meet the needs of the welfare of society in the given time and circumstance." (p. 470)
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> "**Second**: the ultimate *empirical test* of the success of the ruler's *siyāsat* is the *maṣlaḥat*-welfare of the community." (p. 470)
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> "The ruler's correct identification of the universal truth of the Pre-Text, and his correct formulation of its application in a specific time and circumstance, brings society-at-large into consonance and harmony with the universal truth of the Pre-Text—and thus achieves the welfare and felicity of the polity." (p. 471)
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> "Now, laws made in consonance with and for the fulfillment of the universal principles of the *shar'īat* are expressions and specifications of *shar'īat*: as such, it is difficult to conceive of the ruler's *siyāsat* as anything other than an expression of *shar'īat.* And since the *test* of *siyāsat as shar'īat* is *maṣlaḥat* (i.e., if the *siyāsat* delivers *maṣlaḥat* then it *is* self-evidently in accordance with health-giving *shar'īat*), the reverse also applies: whenever a ruling entails *maṣlaḥat*, it is commensurate with God's intentions. (p. 471)
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> "The office of ruler is, by definition, a law-making office: making law is part-and-parcel of *state-craft* which aims "to perfect individual human beings and to order their collective welfare." And *maṣlaḥat* is the proof of the *siyāsat-shar'īat* pudding." (p. 471)

Where is the secular-religious binary and all this? The binary fails.

> **More examples from pp. 472-480**: "In sum, the idea that the making of ruler's law is somehow a putatively 'secular' truth-/legal project separate from a putatively 'non-secular' truth-/legal project (identified with *fiqh*) is a notion incoherent and incompatible with Muslims' own historical conceptualization of ruler's law." (p. 476)

The six summary observations to be made here on the basis of this lengthy section: pp. 480-481

1. Philosophical ethics and political theory was at the heart of the *paideia* of the educated ruling sectors of Muslims.

2. The defining normative statements about one of the most crucial elements in the conceptualization of law in societies of Muslims, viz., the relationship between *siyāsat*/*qānūn* and *fiqh*/*sharʿīah*, are to be found *not* in the genre of *fish-legal* texts *per se*, but rather in the works of *akhlāq*-ethics.
3. Ruler's law and jurists' law are not ontologically separate.
4. As long as ruler's law did not violate the universal principles of Divine Law (the broad protection of *dīn*, life, intellect, lineage, property and honor), they are conceived of as fulfilling the purposes of Divine Law—they are regarded as expressions of *sharʿīah*.
5. This conceptualization was shared by both rulers and jurists—there was not a power dynamic at play in which the rulers overruled the jurists.
6. The pre-eminent value in all of this was *justice*.

Maṣlaḥah and Natural Law (pp. 482-492)

In the interest of [my/our] time, let me quote Ahmed's summary to this section:

> "To sum up: what I have been presenting here is the widespread existence in historical societies of Muslims of a notion of *Islamic* law which arises from hermeneutical engagement with Revelation as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text, where *Islamic* law is conceptualized as an operation of goods and values and judgements obtained from the Pre-Text by the force of nature, by collective human reason and experience, and by reading of the Text, all present in social and discursive diffusion as Con-Text, and brought to bear by Muslims in the assessment and fulfillment of the interests of welfare in the particular time. **This is a notion of Islamic law that is significantly different in configuration and operation from that which we are likely to obtain out of the concentrated study of works of *uṣūl al-fiqh* jurisprudence alone**—which is precisely by point. **To understand how historical societies of Muslims—rather than just Muslim *fuqahā'*-jurisprudents—have conceived of law it is necessary to look beyond legal discourses to the *diffusion* of the concept of law and of values related to law in the larger discourses of society**." (p. 492)

The "Legal Case" of the Qāḍī (Judge) of Hamadān (pp. 492-505)

Fictional case from the *Gulistān (Rose-Garden)* of Saʿdī of Shiraz (*fl.* 1281): To summarize: the *maṣlaḥah* was "let whosoever is without sin throw the first stone" (basically, sort of kind of). (pp. 492-499) — The king executes good *siyāsat*, even if it is not good *fiqh*.

In a rare moment wherein Ahmed explicitly gives some advice to **modern Muslim reformers**, who often call on *maṣlahah* and *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* in their projects of Islamic legal reform:

> "Modern reformist tracts routinely invoke *maṣlahah* and *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* as crucial to the reform of the law—but hardly any of their authors (and nor, for that matter, hardly any legal historians) conceive that the meaning of the Islamic values of *dīn*, life, intellect, family, property and honor might, historically, have been expressed normatively in, and might today retrospectively be sought and found in, projects such as philosophy, Sufism, art, and fictional literature. Recognizing the philosophical-ethical conceptualization of ruler's law as Islamic law should significantly affect and influence the conceptualization by modern Muslims of the norms and values of the project of the law as diffused, performed and reiterated in the broader

> discourses and practices of society. The philosophical-ethical conceptualization of *ruler's law as Islamic law* arises from a broader conceptualization of Revelation in which to give priority to reason over the letter of the Text is precisely *not* to 'abandon hermeneutical ties to revelation'; it is rather to seek the Revelation of the Truth of the Pre-Text in primary sources beside and beyond the Text." (p. 505)

Or, **modern reforms turn to secular values and discourses to frame *maṣlahah* and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* rather than to the Islamic discourses of philosophical ethics, Sufism, and fictional literature**.

One Form or Many Forms of Islam(ic Meaning)? (pp. 505-514)

When considering societies of Muslims, historically and today, one notices the attempt to unify contradictions in Islam:

> "Pre-eminent among these [unifying contradictions] is the tension—ever-present as potential contradiction—inherent to the spatiality of Revelation, between *Islam as principle or meaning* and *Islam as form*. This tension expresses itself routinely and universally in societies of Muslims in the chronic question of **whether (and to what extent) Islam/God's Truth resides and obtains in *meaning and values* which may legitimately find truthful and valid expression *in any form that retains, enacts or conveys those principles and values;* or whether (and to what extent) Islam/God's Truth resides and obtains in *specific, delimited forms which are the only true and legitimate expressions of the Truth/Islam***. It is this tension between Islam as consisting in underlying (Unseen/unstated) meanings and values and Islam as consisting in overlying (Seen/stated) specific forms that lies at the crux of most inter-Muslim disagreements over 'What is Islam?'" (p. 506)

One way is to **restrict** forms, the other is to **multiply** the forms. The former **limits** truth to Text and to the Pre-Text discoverable *only via the Text*, and the latter **expands** access to the truth via direct access to Pre-Text *outside of the Text.* (p. 507). The **former**, "the discourse of the Textual project of Hadith," is exemplary of the specificist or *restrictivist* position. The **latter** is exemplified in the Pre-Textual projects of philosophy and Sufism, and is the *expansivist* position. (pp. 507-508)

Examples from Akbarian Sufism and Sufism in West Africa (pp. 508-509)

> "The question of *to what extent* Islam is ***truth unrestricted in form***—to use the Arabic term, to what extent is it *muṭlaq*; or to what extent Islam is ***truth restricted in form***—to what extent is it *muqayyad*; is the structural question that lies at the heart of inter-Muslim debates and contestations over what it is that constitutes orthodoxy in Islam." (p. 510)

> [All of these questions enumerated on p. 510] are "**questions about the relationship between the form of Truth and the meaning of Truth**. The question of the relationship between form and meaning is also the central (if often unstated) question that informs the reformist discourses of modern Muslims. Attempts to reform—I repeat: *reform*—Islam in response to the exigencies and conditions of modernity invariably end up in the question: is the *form* in question—whether the old form or the new form (that is, the *re*-form)—Isalm(ic) or not? (pp. 510-511)

There follows the example of modern reformers who endeavor to establish equal legal and social rights for women in Islamic terms (pp. 511-513).

> "As far as I am aware, **no modern reformer has attempted to play the philosophical card and to appeal explicitly to the categorical higher Truth-value of Pre-Text as trumping Text**—what one might call, in emendation of the literary practice of 'reading across the grain,' reading 'across-the-Text' from/into Pre-Text. Such a trumping of Text by Pre-Text would be a maneuver that, if successful, would considerably reconfigure the hermeneutical terrain of contemporary Isalm. Rather, the tendency of modern reformers has been to maneuver, to the extent possible, within the parameters (or grain) of the Text—that is, to identify Pre-Text through and by the Text. In any case, **in the present day-and-age, where the *padeia* of societies of modern Muslims is precisely *not* that of the philosophical-Sufi amalgam, Muslims' awareness of their philosophical, Sufi, and larger literary heritage**—that is, of the full array of the Con-Texts of Revelation—**is a relatively attenuated one**. In this state of the historical eclipse and relative unavailability of the Con-Textual thought-tools and norms by which an argument might be made that appeals for its authority to the epistemology of the philosophical-Sufi amalgam, such an argument becomes a very difficult one to produce, and an even harder one to sell." (pp. 513-514)

Modern Islam, Modern Muslims, Modern Islamic Movements and Thought (pp. 514-537)

On pages 514-515, Ahmed proffers the most succinct summary of the the impact of "the historical phenomenon that we know as *modernity*" on Muslims societies.

> "My fundamental point here is that Muslims have, in making their modernity, moved decisively away from conceiving of and living in normative Islam as hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation, and have, instead, begun conceiving of and living normative Islam primarily as hermeneutical engagement with Text of Revelation…Modern Muslims conceive of *Islam* in terms that are crucially different to how pre-modern Muslims conceived of Islam—different, that is, in terms of the focus, emphasis and weightage of the hermeneutical engagement with Revelation" (pp. 515-516)

On page 516, Ahmed asserts nothing less than ***that modern Muslims are unable to understand the Islam presented in this book (in terms of the six questions) as Islamic***. They lack the hermeneutical tools to do so, given that they have "downsized Revelation" to the Text.

On the empiricization of reality—that is, an epistemology that constitutes the real object of knowledge to be solely as that which can be epiricized." (p. 517):

> "[This has] generated in societies of Muslims (as it did in societies of non-Muslims) a turning-away from the idea of the Unseen world as an accessible objet of real knowledge alongside the Seen world, and a turning towards the Seen World as the valid and accessible object of real knowledge" (p. 517)

Out goes sufism and philosophy and ethics and fictional literature and poetry, and in comes scriptural-legal discourses based solely on the Text. **Only the Seen world is real, and the only object accessible in the Seen world is the Text of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* literature**. (pp. 517-519)

> "The effects of the orientation of meaning-making away from Pre-Text and towards Text are also revealingly illustrated in the modern reconstitution and *domestication* of Sufism from an *explorative* project of the Self to a *pietistic* or *quietistic* project of the Self; that is, the reconstitution of Sufism from being a private-public explorative undertaking carried out on its own epistemological bases to *make* Truth and Meaning from the Pre-Text (where the words of the Text are subjected to readings that bring them into existential accord with the Truth and meaning of the Pre-Text), to Sufism as a private-individual project of *affirming* prescriptive Truth and Meaning made on the epistemological bases of the legal and creedal discourses of hermeneutical engagement with Text. **Much of what passes for Sufism in the modern world would, I venture, barely be recognized as such by the major Sufi figures of the past—or would be recognized as something like 'Sufism for beginnings.'"** (p. 519)

In sum: "Basically, modern Textual reasoning views philosophical Pre-Textual reasoning as insufficiently Textual (and, thus, as excessively rational), and Sufi Pre-Textual reasoning as both insufficiently Textual *and insufficiently rational* to be Islam(ic)." (p. 520)

> This is illustrative of the **two-pronged attack on Sufism in modernity**: from fundamentalist who deem it un-Islamic, and from modern, rationalists who deem it irrational and "superstitious."

On the modern rejection of hierarchy in favor of some alleged egalitarianism; the claim of "elitism". (pp. 520-521)

> The *dīn*, in other words, is anything but simple (*baṣīṭ*)! (p. 521)

> **Summary:** "The fact that the literary-fictional iterations in thelangauge of metaphor and paradox of the Sufi-philosophical engagement with the Pre-Text are no longer to the same degree at the cognitive and expressive forefront of the discourses of Muslims means, quite simply, that *modern Muslims are far less cognitively habituated than were their pre-modern predecessors to thinking and speaking about Islam in terms of contradiciton, and thus to making meaning for themselves in terms of Islam as ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction*—capacities that, had they been retained, might have served Muslims well in the modern re-location of meaning-making to the public sphere." (pp. 522-523)

And here we have a little more of **Ahmed the reformer, or maybe revivalist** (by which I mean his call to revive the processes of hermeneutical engagement with Pre-, Con-, and Text):

> "I submit that these discourses provide a rich indigenous resource of historical 'Muslim practice,' as well as Muslim ideals, that may well be mobilized by modern Muslims for the cultivation of pluralism—precisely because this discourse is a thought-mode and idiom of flexibility and of coherent contradiction that, as we have already iterated, assumes the multi-dimensional and plural nature even of a single truth." (p. 524)

Persian is no longer the *lingua franca*, or rather the *lingua persa*. (pp. 524-526):

> "As such, the rich fictional discourses of the millennium of Persian-language hermeneutical engagement with the Pre-Text, and the ideas, attitudes, dispositions, and sensibilities contained

> therein are effectively no longer an immediate, accessible and active part of the Con-Text in places where, just a few generations ago, they were a central component of the *paideia* that forms *selves* and the informed the conceptual language and values by which those selves interacted with each other in society." (p. 525)

The ***memory*** of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex has been nearly **erased**, it seems (pp. 526-527): (and it begins to get rather depressing…)

> "Vast swathes of the historical hermeneutical engagements of Muslims with the Pre-Text—philosophical, Sufi, ethical, aesthetical, and other discourses—have, in the modern context, simply been disqualified from the Con-Text of Revelation and deemed as having no salient role in meaning-making in terms of Islam." (p. 527)

> "The overwhelming bulk of modern reformist discourse has largely stayed within the parameters of the epistemology of Textual-legalism, rather than take up what our seventheent Javanese author called the "difficult" and "perilous" path of the Sufi-philosophical amalgam—the latter having become a language with fewer and fewer speakers, and thus a language carrying less and less meaning for societies of Muslims." (p. 527)

The loss of the authority of the *'ulamā'* is not the definitive historical change of modernity in societies of Muslims, it is the loss of the *paideia*: "If one takes a flexible, abstract discourse—such as the historical *paideia* of the Sufi-philosophical amalgam—as one's mnemonic object, one is going to be flexible and abstract *because* of one's mnemonics, not in site of it." (p. 528)

Return to 1st-century Islam + rise of the nation-state + sole use of legal discourse (*fiqh*) for formulation of secular/state law (pp. 529-531) =

> "The overall effect in these various modern conditions is for law to become, by sheer *gravitas* and gravitational pull, the most important discourse definitive and constitutive of modern Islam and of Muslims—with the self-definitional and self-constitutional attention and pre-occupation of the thought-activity of Muslims being irresistibly drawn towards engagement with legal discourse with its preoccupation with prescription and proscription, ad its stark classificatory concern with 'permissible' and 'impermissible' (*ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*) as the pre-eminent criteria of meaning-making." (p. 531)

Finally, the serendipitous and calamitous factors of **Wahhābism** that have shaped the Islamic modern pp. 532-537)

"**To sum up**, then, modernity has—or rather, Muslims in modernity have—reconstituted in recalibrated human and historical Islam by giving emphasis to Text over Pre-Text and Con-Text, and thus to law over other discourses of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, to prescription over exploration, to public over private, to egalitarianism over hierarchy, to literal thought over metaphorical and paradoxical thought." (p. 537)

What I am not Saying
(pp. 537-541)

1. Islam is not unique, but it is unique enough to conceptualize *first* on its own terms. Furthermore, "our conceptual gains and re-orientations may be brought productively to bear when we turn to (re-)conceptualizing other phenomena." (p. 538) **I understand this to mean that our conceptualization of other religious traditions should be re-orientated after reading this book**.
2. Something made meaningful in terms of Islam may also be made meaningful in terms of another phenomenon or process or hermeneutics.
3. Islam is *not* whatever Muslims say or do, and whatever Muslims say or do is *not* Islam. Rather, "we should approach *whatever* Muslims say or do as a potential site or locus for expression and articulation of *being Muslim*—and this look at each [of] those statements and actions with eyes wide open to how these sites are meaningfully formed and informed by the hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation that is Islam.
4. Scriptural-legal discourses prescriptive and proscriptive of creed and law are not to be done away with; we are to do away with understanding these discourses as definitively constitutive of Islam. They must be viewed alongside *explorative discourses*.
5. Pre-modern Islam is not somehow more authentically Islam than modern Islam; rather, modern Muslims find great difficulty in understanding (and accepting) the hermeneutical projects of pre-modern Muslims.
6. Not nostalgic (though, some things were better in"the good old days", to be sure).
7. This is not soft, irenic, "Islam means peace" Islam. "I have no interest in peddling an over-irenic picture of Islam, or of Muslims, to the West." This is no presentation of "turn-the-other-cheek" Islam. This is why he sought "to show how we may speak of both art and of violence as meaningfully *Islamic*." (p. 539)
8. Inter-Muslim/-Islamic disagreements remain, but disagreements cohere.
9. This applies both to "mature" Islam and to "proto-Islam", because the point is that Pre-Text and Con-text existed *ab initio*.
10. Not *just* Balkan-to-Bengal complex. (pp. 540-541)

Chapter 7? The Importance of Being Islamic
(pp. 542-546

The conceptualization of Islam in terms of hermeneutical engagement—as a process—**has sought not to eliminate difference but rather to include difference**.

> "Conceptualizing and naming the primary component of sources of Revelation as Pre-Text and Text provides us with a vocabulary that enables us to *see* and *understand* how commitment to and engagement with Revelation can be and is, in good faith and reason, conceived of as engagement with a source of Truth other than the Text of Revelation. This, in turn, enables us to see and understand the prolific and various Muslim engagements with the Pre-Text of Revelation *as Islam*." (p. 543)

This enables us to understand **Muslim engagement with Revelation as *explorations* of Pre-Text in search of Truth and Meaning**.

> "The Con-Text of Revelation is the lexicon of the available vocabulary of Islam in terms of which, in any given historical context, Muslims engage with Revelation to make further statements of Truth and Meaning—that is, to make further Con-Text, which is further Islam." (p. 543)

> "In particular, this conceptualization enables us to see the inherent structural spatiality of Revelation as hierarchy and as interiority/exteriority, a spatiality expressed in different sources for truth, different modes of production of truth, or different methodologies and epistemologies, different meanings and values of truth, different social locations or social theaters for the operation of truth and meaning and value, and different expressive registers of truth-, meaning-, and value-discourse, or different types of language used to communicate different types of truth, meaning and value—all differentiated according to hierarchy and exteriority-interiority." (pp. 543-544)

> "It enables us to detect and recognize Islam not just in the usual places where our received cognitive and analytical habits lead us, but where it actually is present in discourse and praxis as means and meanings. Conceptualizing Islam as meaning-making for the Self in terms of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text also enables us to recognize that *all* acts and statements of meaning-making for the Self by Muslims and non-Muslims that are carried out in terms of Islam—that is, in terms of any of Pre-Text, Text, or Con-Text—**should properly be understood as *Islamic***." (p. 544)

Here is the key point to be made, that is, what do we gain from naming some object *Islamic*?

> "The basic question to be asked when we confront any given phenomenon or object or statement is: what meaning is added by qualifying that phenomenon or object by the word Islamic? (How) does the term Islamic enhance or clarify the constitution of that phenomenon, object or statement? Obversely, how does *not* using the term Islamic deplete or distort the constitution of the phenomenon, object, or statement?" (p. 545)

> **I am well aware that Shahab *did not* write this book for an analysis of popular discourse and the media**, but I cannot fail to relate these questions to Wood's piece in *The Atlantic* last year, and to all uses of "Islamic" in "Islamic violence" or "Islamic terrorism." Replace the word "the/that phenomenon" in the above questions with "terrorism" or with the recent acts of violence from Lahore to Paris. What is gained in terms of constituting the meaning of those events? What is lost? **And again, using the adjective "Islamic" does not mean causation, as is often the case in popular discourse**.

> **The problem, then, is, what is causative in the Islamic?** But this question may be asked in any field within the study of religion. What is causative…? Popularly, religion is conceptualized as offering a set of values by which adherents to said religion *act*. That the Buddhist concept of compassion *causes* people to be compassionate. Or, that the Christian concept of "turning the other cheek" causes people to be pacifists. But, *this is rarely ever the case*.

> This is, in fact, the **error** of popular discourse in its attempt to *understand a society* or to *reduce a society or person's actions* to some set of religious beliefs, values, or practices. **This is also the error of urging people to study religion *for utilitarian and pragmatic purposes, aims, and intentions* of the nation-state and national interests**.

> **"What is Islamic about the Islamic State?" We must ask the above questions to figure out if calling it "Islamic" "enhances or clarifies the constitution of the Islamic State."**

Finally:

> "This book has sought not so much to define, as to *bring into definition*—to bring into view, to discern and to descry—Islam in its plenitude of meaning. Islam, meaning-making for the self by one-fifth of humanity, is *Islam*—it is not anything else—and should be conceptualized, understood and appreciated as such; in terms which cohere with its meanings and by which its meanings cohere. Bu not employing language appropriate to the meaning at stake, and thus by not recognizing Islam for what it is, we—Muslims and non-Muslims—at best misrepresent, and at worst commit an outright injustice to the human and historical existences and endeavors of one-fifth of humanity. **We also do an injustice to ourselves by preventing ourselves from apprehending and benefiting from what those existences and endeavors have to offer us by way of understanding and experiencing the human predicament, as well as from apprehending and benefiting from what those existences and endeavors have to offer us by way of making meaning for ourselves. *Let us understand, apprehend and benefit from the importance of being Islamic***."