What Is Islam?
Reading Group: Session Four of Six
Chapter 4: Culture, Meaning, Symbol System, Core and Nucleus, Whatever Muslims Say It Is, Discursive Tradition, Orthodoxy, Process

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Whence, Where, Whither?

Let us recap the main points of each chapter, situate ourselves, and then ask what more we are seeking:

Chapter 1: The six questions, or *problématiques*, were selected precisely because they represent not the exceptions to the rule of the human and historical phenomenon of Islam, but rather the rule itself. It is one thing to say that there are minor movements, discursive traditions, practices, or theories that contradict a certain conceptualization of Islam and therefore that they *disrupt*, *exceptionally*, the analytical category; it is another thing to suggest that the predominant movements, discursive traditions, practices, or theories *explode* prevalent conceptualizations and analytical categories. Furthermore, these six questions cross over sectarian divisions, and thus they prove useful in addressing both *Sunnī* and *Shīʿa* Islam.

Chapter 2: The fields of Anthropology, Islamic Studies, History, and Religious Studies have endeavored to define Islam. Each field has constructed various conceptualization that tend (1) to **privilege** something as constitutive of Islam, (2) to **identify** no coherence in the phenomenon and thus deny the validity of the concept, (3) and to **define** Islam as a flawed analytical category. Each conceptualization has resulted in one of three deficiencies: (1) **Essentialization**, (2) **Diffusion into many islams**, or (3) **created binaries** between the religious/sacred, on the one pole, and secular/profane/culture on the other pole. There is also a disproportionate focus on faith, belief, orthodoxy, practices, and law as constitutive of Islam. **Main argument**: "*the human and historical phenomenon of Islam is a field of meaning where truth is constituted, arranged, and lived in terms not of categories constituted by mutual exclusion, but rather by categories of mutual insorption and inter-locution that run athwart and conceptually frustrate the religious/secular binary or religion/culture division*." (116)

Chapter 3: The results of the development of post-enlightenment secularization ramified well beyond the contours and contexts of Christian Europe. Secularization had hermeneutical consequences, implicit and explicit, for the way European scholars gazed at "religiosity". The underlying assumption of the category of religion, despite every recent effort in the study of religion to uproot the field from the soil of Enlightenment modernity, is that all religion everywhere models itself off the archetype that is (a certain brand of post-Enlightenment, Protestant) Christian Religion, and functions within the following dualities: religion vs. science, sacred vs. profane, religion vs. secular, ordinary acts vs. extraordinary acts, natural vs. supernatural. It also assumes religious authority to be fundamentally, at its core, the proscription and prescription of ethical acts *in their particularities*. Ahmed demonstrates, vis-à-vis previous scholarship, how as soon as one defines "the Islamic" as *X*, one is left with the ineluctable conclusion that *nox*-*X* is "not Islamic". Alternatively, one contends that there is no coherence in "the Islamic." But for Ahmed, incoherence is unacceptable:

> "It is, therefore, analytically beyond us to tie these profusely differentiated resemblances together and identify a shared relationship that makes the category **cohere**—which is as good as saying that for analytical or conceptual purposes, it **does *not* cohere**. The problem here again is one of *meaningfulness:* if we cannot tie the relations together—even the resemblances, never mind the contradictions—then we cannot escape the nagging suspicion that, ultimately, the things are not tied together, and that the category 'Islam/Islamic' is at best conventional, at mean arbitrary, and at worst just not very meaningful. We are in some undefined and assuredly dubious place located somewhere between the analytical slippery slope and the conceptual thin end of the wedge." (p. 242)

> "Simply, the exclusive focus on resemblance and similarity entirely misses the conceptual and analytical point. Rather, the question to be asked is a *historical* one…The question is *not* about resemblance; the question is whether different things can **meaningfully cohere** *without* resembling each other; not whether the ***forms*** of the various Islams *resemble* each other in a family way, but rather whether the ***meanings*** expressed by the various Islams, no matter how *different*, are in some way(s) or by some process(es) **related *in their difference* to some *mutual* point** or place or moment or mode of *production of* ***meaning***." (p. 243, **bold mine**)

What now?: "Rather [than suggest that the religious-secular binary (or the legal-supremacist brief) is somehow *not* Islam], the point is that any successful conceptualization of Islam must account for all these contrary claims as Islam, in spite of the degree to which modern Muslims are unable to do the same. I venture that a great deal of the existential tension in modern societies of Muslims arises precisely from the inability of modern Muslims to come to coherent terms with the norms of historical Islam—to come to terms with the *constitution and meaning of their past*—and from the incoherences of the various attempts to address this incoherence." (p. 245)

> **With what are we to replace the category of "religion", then?** Furthermore, are we at risk of an "Islamic" that subsumes and absorbs far too much of…society? culture? knowledge? creativity? literature?—I stumble to find the words lest I be accused of the binaries Ahmed has spent so many pages deconstructing.
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> Let us recall Ahmed's critique of Gardet: for Gardet, "the secular value [is] that which is not 'subsumed in some Ultimate,' and the sacred/religious value, by implication, that which is so *subsumed*." (p. 199)
> - So, is "the Islamic" that which subsumes culture/literature/the sacred/the profane/the religious/the secular? Are we at risk of "the Islamic" becoming "the Ultimate"?
>
> **Is everything Islamic? Or is nothing Islamic? Are we venturing toward a circular argument?**
>
> **Other Questions?**

Islam as Cultural System
(pp. 246-250)

Culture is a semiotic system ("an interworked systems of construable signs"), and the cultural system of religion seeks "to harmonize a people's conceptions of the real with their conceptions of the appropriate way to live" by the imposition of "authority on a complex of symbols." (via Geertz, pp. 246-247)

Geertz: "Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape." **Ahmed argues** that this basically absolves the anthropologist from any responsibility "to understand the *means* by which a community produces meaning/culture/religion." (p. 248, *recalling on p. 249 that Geertz, in his work on Morocco and Indonesia, did not consider the textual, intellectual tradition of either of these two countries*)

Nevertheless, Ahmed does find something useful in Geertz's conceptualization of culture/religion: ***meaning***: "Whatever and however differently Islam may *mean* to Muslims, to all Muslims Islam is ***meaningful***." (p. 249)

"[The] task of conceptualizing and understanding Islam becomes precisely to discover and map its '**Continent of Meaning**' and to make sense of that continent as a *continent*: as a continuous, connected and contained—if topographically, climatically and demographically variegated—entity. It is to conceptualize how that continent is elaborated, articulated, constructed, conceived and experienced as an undulating *whole*, even when its parts present themselves in and as apparently distinct and disconnected local topographies." (pp. 259-260)

Islam as Symbol System
(p. 250-257)

Ahmed draws on **Jacques Waardenburg**'s "sustained attempt" to conceptualize Islam as a semiotic, cultural system. He cites him lengthily from p. 250 to p. 252. The most helpful: "We can study religions like Islam as interpretative systems that enable people to view and interpret reality, society, and life in a **meaningful** way…Studying Islam as an interpreted interpretation of reality, a signification system that is continuously interpreted, is like putting together pieces of a puzzle…If Islam interprets reality, it is itself continuously reinterpreted by its believers, adherents, and sympathizers." (p. 252, **bold mine**)

"[Central] to his formulation of Islam as 'signification system' is, again, the element of ***meaning*** which he elaborates as (a) effected by a set of signs that together make up a signification system (b) constitutive of a group by virtue of being shared by it as norms and values[,] (c) more or less permanent through time, [and] thus ensuring the continuity of the tradition of the group[, which tradition is] (d) constantly referred to by the group and communicated within it[, and is thereby] (e) productive of behavior by the group." (p. 252)

However, just when you think a certain scholar's conceptualization is, "well, not bad!", Ahmed—and this is becoming habitual—cites a passage from said scholar's work that forces you to recant: "The search here is for the meaning of those facts which to all Muslims have a symbolic or signifying function. Among such facts may be counted; the **Qur'ān** and the **person of the Prophet**; specific texts or

sayings from **Qur'ān** and ***Hadīth***; social data such as the rituals and other **prescriptions** including a number of **customs** held to be "**Islamic**"; the self-consciousness of the ***umma*** and the interpretations of Islam; certain words and deeds of certain religious leaders." (pp. 252-253)

- In addition to the various deficiencies outlined by Ahmed on pp. 253-254, it seems this conceptualization **once again reduces Islam to Qur'ān, *aḥādīth*, prescriptions, and rituals**.
- However, and perhaps worse yet, **this conceptualization gradually expands to say nearly nothing**: any custom considered "Islamic" is included, "interpretations of Islam" is rather vague, and "certain words and deeds of certain religious leaders" is definitely indefinite.

> "But, whereas the Prophet, Qur'ān, and Pillars might, **in a fundamentalist signification system**, suffice as the component elements for the purpose of 'providing a common bond between Muslims,' they hardly do the job in helping us to understand 'how Muslims themselves interpret their diversity and unity': that is, in 'providing a common bond between Muslims *while doing justice to varying interpretations and practices*'—especially if that diversity and varying interpretations is presented in terms of the awkward questions we have raised in the first prat of this book." (p. 254)

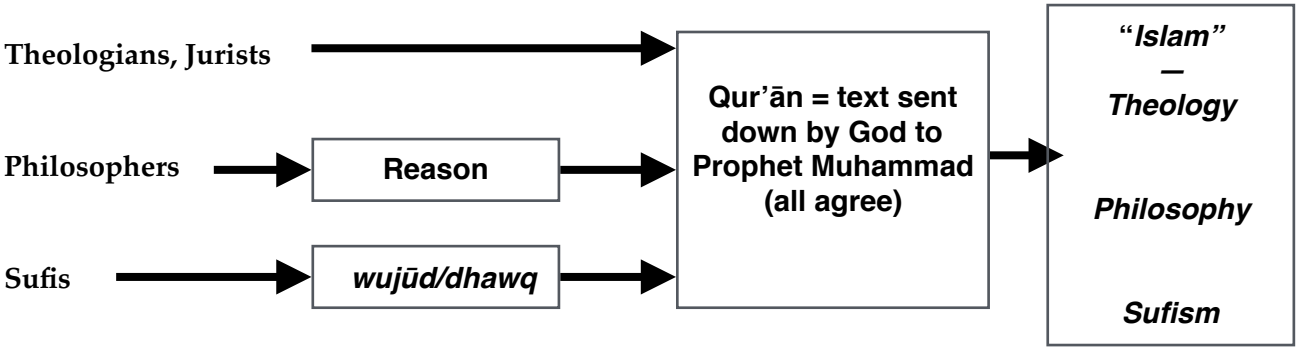
Waardenburg then distinguishes between 'normative Islam' and 'practiced Islam':

> "**Normative Islam** consists of the proscriptions, norms, and values that are recognized as mandatory by the community. These are taken from the basic normative texts, mostly with what is held to be their authoritative interpretation by *'ulamā'* and *fuqahā'*. **Practiced Islam** comprises all those forms and movements, practices, and ideas that in fact, empirically, have existed in Muslim communities in different times and places that have locally been considered 'Islamic' and consequently legitimate." (p. 255)
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> - **Somehow everything that is practiced, that is, all that Muslims *do* and how individual actors *do Islam*, all this is *not normative*, and therefore *merely* local and non-mandatory**.

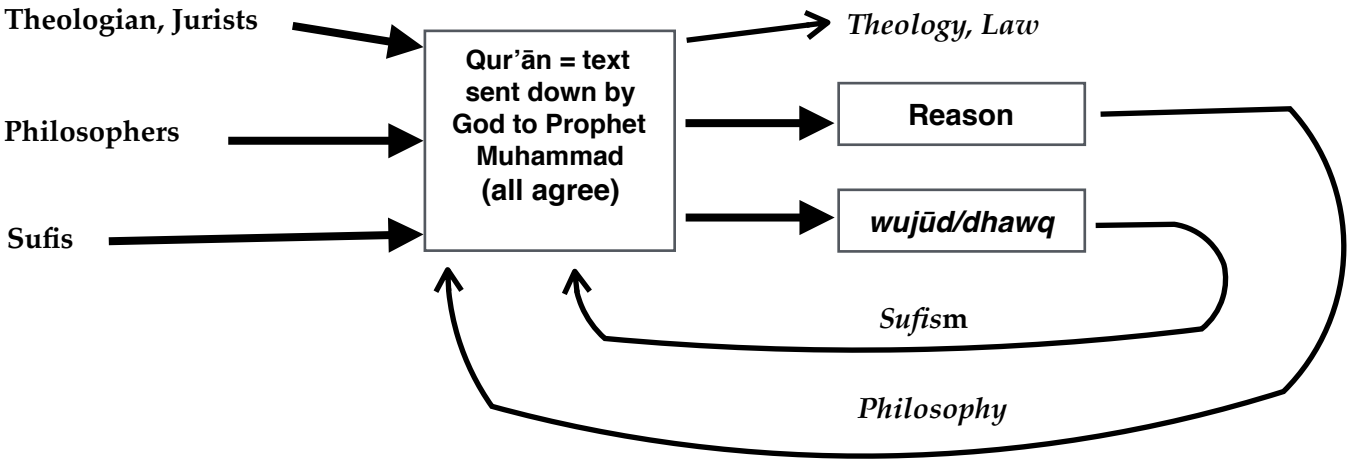
To which Ahmed rebuts: "The jurists' interpretation of 'scripture=Qur'ān and Hadith' becomes…the normative *sine qua non* of Islam. All other Islam is thus, *per definitionem*, non-normative and…not quite, or not yet, or not as meaningfully, or *Islamically*, Islam—and we find ourselves, by divers means, slipping once more into the legal-supremacist trap." (p. 255)

The case of the Qur'ān qua sign-within-the-semiotic-system-of-Islam: A couple (reductive) options

One possibility:



Another possibility: *"Islam"*



"[The] practitioners of these modes of reading **disagree not merely about the *meaning*** of what they are reading/the Qur'ān/the sign, **they disagree about *what* they are reading**—that is, they disagree about what the Qur'ān/the sign *is*. The modes of reading do not merely produce meaning from the signs—from "those facts which to al Muslims have a symbolic or signifying function"—rather the **modes of reading produce the *sign/fact* itself: the Qur'ān is constituted by philosophy and sufism as a *different fact/sign* to the fact/sign that it is for law and theology**. By focusing on pre-constituted signs, Waardenburg's conceptualization of Islam as a signification system fails adequately to come to terms with the constitutive power of *reading* as productive not merely of meaning, but of the signs themselves, as well as to come to terms with the agency of *readers* (especially readers other than *fuqahā'*/*'ulamā'*) as makers of the signs and meanings of normative Islam." (p. 257)

- ***It is not nearly as simplistic as Reader—>Text—>Meaning***; rather, Ahmed is arguing that the reader modifies the constitution of the text itself. **A jurist is reading the same text as a Sufi** only insofar as the (***explicit!***) text was sent down by God to the Prophet. **A jurist is reading a completely different text than the Sufi** insofar as the latter reads it as, say, just one of the many "*signs on the horizons and within themselves/their souls*." (Qur'ān, *fuṣṣilat* 41:53)

Automatons in a Machine: Systems and Institutions
(pp. 257-259)

Even the most sympathetic and sensitive interpreters of the Islamic religious tradition slip into conceptualizations that render Muslims mere objects of the Ultimate Subject that is Islam.

- **Kenneth Cragg**: "Islam organizes *islām,* enshrines it and defines it. It makes Muslims of *muslims*… Islam is the thing and Muslims are the doers." (p. 258)
    - "Terms such as 'institution' and 'system' tend to overshadow human agency, and our use of such terms bends us away from thinking in terms of human agency. What we are deflected from seeing here is the existence of a *dialectic*: Islam makes Muslims and Muslims make (and continue to make) Islam." (p. 258)
- Yet, Ahmed does not want to dismiss Islam qua "*historical incorporation*", its "weighty presence" impressing "itself upon the consciousness and perception of the person encountering it as a massively present structure and force." *Agreeing and disagreeing* with **O. Safi,** he argues that human actors seek to harness the power of, and make meaning with, "that Islam-notion" (pp. 258-259)

"Close only Counts in Horseshoes and Hand Grenades"
W.C. Smith on *The Meaning and End of Religion*
(p. 259-266)

Ahmed would be remiss not to engage carefully and critically the scholarly work of W.C. Smith, for one might argue that his "cumulative tradition" does a fairly decent job in conceptualizing Islam. But, as with Hamid Dabashi, Ahmed deems W.C. Smith "so close, and yet so far."

For W.C. Smith, a "**cumulative tradition**" is the collection of institutions, literary works (prose, poetry), art, ideas, interpretations, patterns of deeds (ritual, moral, ethical), laws, etc., inherited by, in this case, Muslim actors who "**have faith**" (which is something not directly observable) and **express his or her faith as and in the cumulative tradition, thereby contributing to it**. The faith of a Muslim may be unobservable, but by engaging the "cumulative tradition", one may become aware of it insofar as Muslims express their faith and contribute thereby to the cumulative tradition.

- **There is something circular about the following two quotes belonging to W.C. Smith:**
  - "A **religious tradition**, then, is the historical construct, in continuous and continuing construction, **of those who participate in *it***." (p. 261)
  - "Muslim men and women across the centuries have found themselves born into and surrounded by the world inherited from earlier generations of Muslims and ***stamped with an Islamic quality***" (p. 261)

Ahmed argues that W.C. Smith, while arguing to set aside the concept of "religion," in fact does no such thing: "What Smith is actually doing is conceptualizing Islam as *religion*—but as religion re-configured as 'religious faith + cumulative religious tradition' or as inscrutable religious faith expressed observably in cumulative religious tradition." (p. 262) **What's the problem with that?**

- The danger is that we **fall back on preconceived notions of what (religious) faith** is, and we thereby risk ignoring the six questions from Chapter 1: do we turn to the pure rationalism of the Philosophers, the wine-drinking and love lyrics of Ḥāfiẓ, and the all-consuming experiential cosmology of Ibn ʿArabī as loci expressive of faith, or do we look to piety, worship, prescriptive and proscriptive laws, ritual, etc., for typical and thus normative expressions of "Islamic faith." **Why not both? Does it depend on what we consider a meaningful and normative expression of faith?**

While, **on the one hand**, Smith rightfully cautions against idealistic essentializations of Islam on account of the diversity of the tradition and the varying contexts, institutions, societies, and hearts and minds of individual persons; **on the other hand**, Smith suggests that the scholar's (the historian-of-religion's) definition of Islam *necessarily* "will not serve the participant. An outsider defining the Muslims' religion thus…must accordingly recognize that he is using the term 'Islam' to refer to something other than what Muslims can understand by it. **This is partly so in that for the outsiders this 'Islam' is—inescapably—multiform, human, and unstable…for an observer it must be, and for a Muslim it must not**." (p. 264)

- "The result is that the faithless outsider sees Islam as 'multiform, human, and unstable'—which, according to Smith, the Muslim *cannot* do…and, by implication, the faithful Muslim sees Islam as uniform, divine and stable." (p. 265) **Better critique?**

- But, **this is precisely what Ahmed is seeking to demonstrate**, viz., that *Islam* has been understood by *Muslims*, at least by Muslims from the temporal and geographical period of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, as not only multiform and unstable, **but as contradictory, paradoxical, and ambiguous**.

Islam is Whatever Muslims Say it Is: Nominalism (pp. 266-270)

Given the difficulty of proffering a cogent and coherent analytical category of "the Islamic," it might be sound and valid to assert that Islam is whatever Muslims believe it to be. Yet, the issue then arises wherein there is only a nominal relationship between the individual act(s) of identification with "Islam", on the one hand, and the "putative object of identity", on the other. **The "symbol" of Islam is nominally the same, but substantively diverse**. (pp. 266-267)

Again, it is astounding to read some otherwise insightful scholars make some rather obtuse proclamations: "Islam means not what Muslims were *supposed* or *required to believe and do* in accordance with *the precepts of their religion*, but what, *for better or worse,* they actually thought and did—in other words Islamic society and civilization as known to us from history and from present observation." (p. 268, *emphasis mine,* quote from B. Braude and B. Lewis)

- **Thoughts?** Somehow, scholars observed the reality of multifarious manifestations of Islam "on the ground" (and in texts!), each of which manifestations in some way contradicted both "the Islamic revelation vouchsafed by God to the Prophet Muhammad and embodied in the Holy Book of the Qur'ān" and also "the subsequent development of that book by the work of jurists and theologians leading to the whole *imposing corpus* of Islamic Law, theology, tradition, and practice", and instead of redefining the conceptualization of "Islamic revelation" or the texts and practices within the so-called "imposing corpus" to include contradiction, they just assumed that theses Muslims, "for better or worse", thought and acted "contrary to Islam." In other words, **rather than redefine or re-conceptualize what it was that Muslims are/were supposed to believe and do in such a way that said redefinition or re-conceptualization attune itself to other ways of "being-in-the-world" constituted outside of "the precepts of their religion", they just assumed these Muslims were a minority, or did not care about coherence in their patterns of living**.

"Islam is whatever Muslims say it is or believe" = "serviceable *description"* though an "inadequate *concept*" (p. 269), and this leads to "islams-not-Islam." In any case, many intra-Islamic interventions take place to stem the perpetual increase in islams: this is the **intervention to establish orthodoxy** that is enabled by the desire and authority to do so.

Orthodoxy and Discursive Traditions (pp. 270-278)

Talal Asad has recourse to the fundamental concepts proffered by Michel Foucault ("discourse") and Alasdair MacIntyre ("tradition") in order present the concept of Islam as "discursive tradition": "a tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history…An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the past." (p. 271)

- For Asad, a discursive tradition is **prescriptive** and **authoritative**. This conceptualization may be Asad's way of redressing otherwise weak conceptualizations of Islam ("islams-not-Islams", "Islam is whatever Muslims say it is", and "Geertz's reading of cultural symbols by free assocation").

However, with this particular corrective comes the **predominance of "orthodoxy"** in the analyses of Islamic discursive traditions.

> "**Orthodoxy** is any truth-claim that Muslims in a given time and place institute, regulate and require through a *process* of exercise of power as being ***authoritatively correct***—and thus as not welcoming or accommodative of contradictory claims, which are duly condemned, excluded, undermined and replaced. Thus, the 'domain of orthodoxy' *is* the domain of Islam —**"Orthodoxy is *crucial to all Muslim traditions.*"** (p. 273)

Key: So we can and certainly should have a view to the various matrices of power-relations within any given context when we endeavor to ***describe*** a dominant constitution of Islam, but at this point we are merely describing how a certain "Islam" came to predominate a certain society at a certain temporal and geographical period.

> "However, it is another thing altogether…to put forward a schema where the definitive purpose of the discursive tradition/Islam *is* the production of orthodoxy. In such a schema, Islamic reasoning emerges as a reasoning whose 'reasons for arguing' are directed towards the authoritative prescription of exclusive truth—that is, orthodoxy." (p. 273)

> **Orthodoxy implies prescription and restriction of truth**. Now, the more pluralistic and exploratory truth becomes, the less meaningful the concept of Islam-as-Orthodoxy becomes. Furthermore, if orthodoxy is the lens through which we see "the Islamic", then that means its opposite is ever emerging on the horizon: heterodoxy. One may, I suppose, **expand the notion of "what is orthodox" to include accomodation, expansion, plurality, contradiction and exploration—and thus 'heterodoxy'—but then we do not mean what we say when we say "orthodoxy", do we?** (p. 274)

> Furthermore, "Islam = Orthodoxy" is nearly seamlessly transposed into "Islam = *sharīʿah*".

Once again, even when a scholar points to the multiplicity of interpretations within the Islamic discursive tradition, **he or she condescendingly and patronizingly asserts that, e.g., "in this sea of diversity each believer upholds his form as the only really true one."** As Ahmed points out, "Muslims…are hopeless *orthodoxizers* whose individual *subjectivity* is constituted in the inability to recognize the validity of the individual subjectivity of other Muslims." (p. 276)

> "What this does not help us to understand is how it is that all these people, each insisting on his, or her, own monopoly in the economy of right and wrong, can (most of the time) live successfully side by side with each other in the same village—or town, or city, or country, or *dār al-islām*." (p. 276)

- **Why is this a question or problem?** I mean, haven't we all lived side by side with people who self-ascribe to the same ideology, tradition, religion, or whatever you want to call it, but with whom we also have fundamental disagreements? Is it because "we" do it "through secularism", but Ahmed wants to demonstrate how Muslims do it "through Islam"? **What am I missing here?** (I ask this even though I am aware of the numerous valorizations of plurality and contradiction in the Akbarian and also mystico-poetic tradition.)

> **Kātib Çelebī example**: Ahmed states that Çelebī "expresses here a conceptualization of being Muslim that is thoroughly 'un-orthodoxizing' in its way of going (*madhhab*) and disposition (*meşreb*)—that is to say, its primary purpose is not to prescribe and proscribe, but rather to *accommodate within reason* or, *within reason, to accommodate*." (p. 277) **Now, it must be noted that**

Çelebī is dealing with "intelligent person", and does not mention "the Muslim". What makes the quote from *Mīzān-ül-ḥaqq* "Islamic"?

A Better Example: *Ḥayrat* (pp. 278-282)

"*Ḥayrat* is precisely an attempt to come to terms with the fact that God does *not*, as the orthodoxizers would have Muslims have it, 'speak but with one tongue,' but rather that He expresses and manifests Himself in a prodigious *variety* of mutually-opposing statements and forms, the contemplation of which produces perplexity. Perplexity, which is, of course, precisely a condition of *non-resolution of truth*, is thus **valorized** as an appropriate and positive response for the muslim to have to Divine Truth —that is, as a **normative Islamic value** (albeit a little less studied one)." (p. 279)

- **This is not merely a trope** used by mystics to make a point, **but an existential condition and disposition that was meaningful**; it took on many intellectual, literary, aesthetic, and performative forms within popular discourses, to be sure.
    - **How do you orthodoxize paradox?** (p. 281) In any case, the overemphasis of prescription and orthodoxy in the conceptualization of Islam has often been the cause of an all-too-easy dismissal of the mystico-poetic disposition of *ḥayrat*. **Scholars propounding the Islam-is-orthodoxy conceptualization are left perplexed themselves,** and so err on the side of excluding *ḥayrat* as Islamic, rather than on the side of reformulating or reconceptualizing what they consider Islamic.

Even if the following, from a 1987 article, may no longer be the standard conceptualization of Islam, it still (a) **predominates popular, non-scholarly discourse**, to be sure, and (b) is **shocking in itself, even for 1987**: "All social action by Muslims, *acting as Muslims* (acceptors of the *sharīʿah*), is constrained by the objectively invariable prescriptions of "Islam," known to the believer first from the Qur'an and secondly (if more questionably invariant) the *sunna*. These prescriptions…supply a major, sometimes determinative, part of the perceived objective conditions which direct or constrain action." (p. 282, citing William Roff)

From Prescriptive Authority to Explorative Authority (pp. 282-286)

Ahmed is not denying that there was a strain of discourse that was *prescriptive* and *authoritative*; rather, he is gainsaying the assertion that this prescriptive authority was (a) the only authority or even (b) the predominant one. He thus suggests another form of authority: *explorative authority*. "In order to explore, one must take the view, first, that one has the authority to do so (that is, that one is not trespassing one's limits), and, second, that there is something of *value* or *meaning* to be obtained from the exploration—indeed, that *exploration itself is of value and meaning*." (p. 283).

> It is precisely explorative authority that is effective in the projects of Philosophy, Sufism, the poetics of Ḥāfiẓ, art, music, etc., in which projects individual agents and communities seek meaning and value—Truth—by exploration into the unknown. (p. 283-284)
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> "explorative discourse does not seek to *prescribe* a single meaning as *orthodox=Islam*; rather, it *explores a range of possible meanings as Islam* and is prepared to leave those meanings both unsettled and unsettling…Now…the two types of authority, prescriptive and explorative, are not mutually exclusive: a discourse or a society or an individual may (equally and unequally)

be informed by both—but for that very reason, *both types of authority* must be accounted for in an account of that discourse or society or individual." (p. 284)

Now here we begin to see glimpses of Ahmed's slowly forming re-conceptualization of Islam: "In conceptualizing Islam we must certainly attend to…not just orthodoxizing reasoning *addressed at the production of unambiguous, bounded and binding meaning,* but explorative reasoning *addressed at the production of ambiguities, potentialities, and expanding meaning*. This explorative reasoning valorizes disagreement as a positive condition for the Muslim community…and valorizes perplexity (*ḥayrat*) as a meaningful condition for the Muslim individual in engagement with Divine Truth." (p. 284-285)

Again, this is not just saying: Muslim actors disagree, just like religious actors of any religious tradition disagree, so what's the big deal? **Rather, it appears Ahmed is suggesting that disagreement, paradox, contradiction, and perplexity are all *modus operandi islamici.*** This is fundamentally different than merely declaring disagreement within a tradition, which would be unarguable at best, and banal at worst. **This is *valorizing disagreement and perplexity***.

Claim: "The historical *bulk* of the normative discursive tradition of Muslims is non-prescriptive and non-orthodoxizing—instead, it is *explorative* of a multiplicity of truths and values—at least, this is how it forcefully appears when we do not pre-emptively *exclude* from that discursive tradition those texts that are, historically, the most read, recited and invoked texts of Muslim self-expression, exemplified in the literary canon of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex…[The discourse of love and wine, for example,] is not governed by an authoritative urge to *fix the limitations of the correct*—rather it is informed by the age to *explore and expand the dimensions of the meaningful*." (p. 286)

Samāʿ as Explorative Practice (p. 286-290)

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawwānī (d. 1502) and Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209) **valorize *samāʿ* precisely because it surpasses what is achieved in "*sharīʿah*-prescribed devotional movements**" (i.e., the five daily prayers): pp. 286-288

Better yet: "[The] greatest Chief Jurisconsult of the Ottoman Empire, the Şeyḫ-ül-Islām Ebü-s-Suʿūd, issued a *fatwā* in Ottoman Turkish…in response to the question: 'Is it permissible [*ḥalāl*] that the people of Unity (*ehl-i tevḥīd*) from amongst the followers of the Sufi path carry out *ẕikr* [God-remembrance rituals] in mosques and other gatherings by making rhythmic movement?'" (pp. 288-289)

Of note:

- This was geared towards non-Arabic speaking individuals, and so thus the 'commonality'.
- The question was *very specific*, in fact. It concerns…
    - Adherents of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, a subset of Sufis (and so the question was not whether Sufis may perform *dhikr*)
    - Performing *dhikr* in mosques (and so the question was not whether *dhikr* may be performed somewhere else)
    - A particular *dhikr* of rhythmic movement (and so not the mere recitation of a name or phrase)

In any case, the response, again from the **chief jurist** of the Ottoman Empire, **the highest authority on the *Sharīʿah***, is as follows: "Knowledge of Divine Truth is a limitless ocean. The

> *Sharīʿah* is its shore. We are the people of the shore. The great Sufi masters are the divers in that limitless ocean. We do not argue with them." (p. 289)
>
> **Now this could have just as easily been a couple *bayt*s from a *ghazal* by Ḥāfiẓ**. He "is saying quite simply that *Sufism constitutes a truth-space where the law should not go:* the policing of the domain of Real-Truth/*ḥaqīqah* is not the business of the jurists's *sharīʿah*." (p. 289)[1] **If we cannot trust a jurist to give us prescriptive discourse, the whom can we trust?** Ahmed suggests we recognize the "central place of non-prescriptive discourses—texts and practices *that do things other than to correct and prescribe*." (p. 289)

All this to say: If we rely on Asad's and Roff's conceptualization of Islam=orthodoxizing discursive tradition, then "those texts and practices whose engagement with Divine Revelation is not bound up in a dynamic of orthodoxy become *ipso facto* something else than "proper Muslim action"…—even when those texts and practices, as a matter of historical fact, were absolutely central to 'the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledge.' [Asad]" (p. 290)

Other Conceptualizations (pp. 290-295

John Obert Voll: Islam as 'a community of discourse' and 'a discourse based world-system' (pp. 290-292)

- This conceptualization focuses on the elements of mutual intelligibility between various Muslims, and **not mutual agreement**. The emphasis is on communication of meaning. "I would suggest that to define a community of discourse requires us *to pay close attention less to things on which they agree, and more to the mutually intelligible language in which they are able both to agree—and to disagree meaningfully*." (p. 292)

Ahmet Karamustafa: A nucleus or core of ideas or practices of Islam, which core is never discovered, but the manifestations of which are somehow everywhere as a negotiated version thereof. (pp. 292-294)

- "If, ultimately, what these local manifestations have in common is only that each makes a *different claim to derive from a common source or point of reference,* then should our attention, perhaps, not go towards the ***processes*** by which these claims are made and negotiated? Perhaps the collective integrity of the innumerable different negotiations over Islam is to be located in a means of conceptualizing *what it is that is shared by the different processes by which claims to Islam are made*." (p. 294)

Aaron Hughes: The historical multiplicity and complexity of the processes by which Muslims make claims to Islam prevent the apprehension of Islam. In fact, Hughes argues that "such acts of extrication" have "invented 'Islam,' by making 'Islamic data' emerge from philological, philosophical, mystical, and theological systems that can be accessed in and through texts (the older the better) and divorced from bodies." (p. 295)

- **The argument here appears to be that the only Islam is the Islam of physical communities, all else being an invented system**. But, Ahmed contends that the analytical and conceptual point is

[1] Ahmed does remind us in a footnote, and rather vaguely: "It should be noted that other *fatwā*s issued in the name of Ebü-s-Suʿūd take a less accommodating view; see Ahmed and Filipovic, *Neither Paradise nor Hellfire."*

not to "extricate a *thing* from the processes…but to understand the *processes* as Islam. Indeed, the analytical and conceptual task is to identify *how* they are the *same process*." (p. 295)

Toward a Conceptualization: Islam is a Process
(pp. 296-297)

Ahmed encourages us to **move beyond the distinction, dichotomy, and duality that is "religion" and "culture"**; this is the only way "**to constitute the relevant category: that of *Islam***." (p. 296)

"The verbs 'negotiate' and 'deliberate' (which we have seen recurring, with variable degrees of profit, in several of the authors discussed above) point to three things:

[1] that Islam is a *process*,
[2] that it is a process of human discursive and social activity,
[3] and that the discourse is characterized by a multiplicity of voices.

But even if Islam is **not an essence, but a *process***, in order to know what *Islam is*, we still need to be able to *conceptualize the process* that is Islam. And if we are going to use the adverb 'Islamically' (or the adjective 'Islamic') ***meaningfully*** to qualify verbs such as 'negotiate' and 'deliberate'—we need to conceptualize this process in a manner that locates *what it is that makes this specific negotiation or deliberation Islamic*. We need to attend to the predications, predicaments and processes of reading, reasoning, and acting; we need to attend to the **structures and modes and media of truth-making and meaning-making**—we need to attend, in both a broad and a close sense, to **hermeneutical engagement**. That is a good place whence to embark." (p. 297)

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Truth and Meaning

In other words, Islam is a way of being human, a way of negotiating and deliberating truth and meaning. Islam is a way of producing and interpreting truth and meaning. But, what is the process whereby truth and meaning are established, engaged, and interpreted?

How is defining a process any less daunting, or any less generative of difficulties, **than defining an essence**?

I am reminded of the **Buddhist concept *pratītyasamutpāda***, viz., dependent co-origination, or inter-dependent origination: "all physical and mental manifestations which constitute individual appearances are interdependent and condition or affect one another, in a constant process of arising and ceasing." **Of course, this is often a complement to, and explanation of, the Buddhist concept of emptiness.** This is just a critical assessment of what is at stake, not an *a priori* judgment, to be sure.

Other questions?

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