



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414

Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation

Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F

Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

## Book Review

# What is Islam?

## The Importance of Being Islamic

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### To cite this article:

Moten, Abdul Rashid. "Book Review: What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic." Review of *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, by Ahmed Shahab. *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 3 (2017): 87-90.



Published online: 18 October 2017



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## **BOOK REVIEW: *WHAT IS ISLAM?* *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ISLAMIC***

Abdul Rashid Moten \*

Shahab Ahmed. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015. pp. 624. ISBN: 978-0-691-16418-2.

Shahab Ahmed, a research fellow in Islamic legal studies at Harvard Law School, died of leukaemia at the age of 48. He led a fascinating life that took him from Singapore and Kuala Lumpur to Cambridge and Egypt. Born at Mount Alvernia Hospital, Singapore, in 1966, of Pakistani parents, he was sent to the Caterham School, a British boarding school, as a child.

After boarding school, Ahmed studied at the Islamic University of Kuala Lumpur and then obtained a master's degree from the American University in Cairo. He obtained a doctorate from Princeton University for a dissertation on the *Satanic Verses* explored by Salman Rushdie. Ahmed found the story of the *Satanic Verses*, with its irreverent depiction of the Prophet (pbuh) as having mistaken words suggested by Satan as divine revelation, to be true and points out it was widely accepted in the early centuries before it was rejected by Islamic orthodox scholars for not being in harmony with the integrity of divine revelation and the notion of Prophetic infallibility. Ahmed was largely interested in Islamic intellectual history and keenly observed the incident surrounding Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. He appreciated good wine and felt in good company with Jahangir, Ghalib and Hafiz (all of whom lauded the joys of love, wine and romance). The book's cover depicts an emperor holding a wine cup in one hand and a book in the other. This unusual book, it seems, is a product of his diverse personal and educational journey, and an attempt on his part to make sense of his faith, which departed in some ways from mainstream Muslims. However, Ahmed did not live to see the publication of *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*.

This is a controversial study of the formation of Islamic orthodoxy. Fluent in many languages, Ahmed's *What is Islam?* is an encyclopaedic work consuming 600 pages of long citations, transcriptions into Latin characters of lengthy passages in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Punjabi and other languages, tedious repetitions, and over 1,000 argumentative footnotes. The book is divided into three parts and six chapters, as well as a short preface and a concluding statement summarising its main arguments. Part one raises six questions about Islam. Part two contains four chapters dealing with, among others, culture and civilisation, sacred and profane, discursive tradition and orthodoxy. Here he provides a critique of the simple equation of Islam with religion. Part three is titled "Re-conceptualizations" and, in these chapters, Ahmed offers

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a notion of Islam that is diametrically opposed to the Islam professed and practised by the billions of Muslims who are termed traditionalists and radicals. To Ahmed, Islam, as defined by the *ulama'* (religious scholars) is too limiting, expansive, centred on one set of texts, and dismissive of seemingly irregular practices, and as such does not capture “the phenomenon at stake,” which is the “human and historical phenomenon of Islam” (p. 116).

The book begins with a provocative question regarding drinking wine. An eminent European philosopher was troubled to see a Muslim colleague drinking wine, so asked: “Do you consider yourself a Muslim?” “Yes,” came the reply. “How come, then, you are drinking wine?” The Muslim colleague smiled gently. “My family have been Muslims for a thousand years,” he said, “during which time we have always been drinking wine.” “You see, we are Muslim wine-drinkers” (p. 3). This subject of a Muslim tradition to drink wine is a recurring theme for Ahmed. For many Muslims and non-Muslims, Islamic law prohibits drinking wine along with games of chance. The Prophet (pbuh) specifically banned all intoxicants – large or small. These prohibitions notwithstanding, Ahmed, through his research, found:

an equally distinctive mark of the history of Muslims has been a widely held and constantly reiterated alternative evaluation of wine in non-legal discourses where wine and the consumption thereof are invested with a positive meaning expressive of higher, indeed rarified value – and this positive meaning has been enacted in society both in literary reiteration and in the physical consumption of wine in social settings (p. 58).

He has included lengthy citations from medical literature of Muslims praising wine for its happiness-inducing qualities and identified many Muslims, such as Ibn Sīnā, the most significant Muslim philosopher of pre-modern era, who “routinely drank wine in good company.” He quotes Abu ‘Ubayd al-Juzjani who reported, every night, Ibn Sīnā’s students would:

... gather at his house, while by turns, I would read from the *Shifa'* and someone else would read from the *Qanun*. When we were done, various types of singers would appear, a drinking party [*majlis al-sharb*] was prepared along with its appurtenances, and we would partake of it.

Ahmed knew well that drinking wine as well as painting figures is prohibited in Islam, but positively valued in non-legal discourse. To him, wine drinkers are not “bad” or “non-observant,” but they faithfully observe religious rituals. Wine and Islamic practice may seem contradictory, but the relationship is “mutually constitutive” within the broader frame of a “common paradigm of Islamic life and thought.” These apparent contradictions are “constitutive of Islam,” where “ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction, and paradox are legitimate and enfranchising predicaments experienced and lived as a crucial part of being Muslim (lived as Islam)” (pp. 200-201).

Likewise, Ahmed suggests, knowledge of Islam requires reading the *Divan* of Hafiz, the great 14th-century Persian poet, with its treatment of drinking wine, erotic love and the hypocrisies of self-righteous moralists. It is “widely-read, widely-memorized, widely-recited, widely-invoked, and widely-proverbialized book of poetry in Islamic history” (p. 32). *Divan*

of Ḥāfīz, which exemplified “ideals of self-conception” among the Muslims of the “Balkans-to-Bengal,” must not be marginalised or delegitimised. He argues the philosophical synthesis of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), whose teachings were dubbed heretical by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), be taken seriously as Islamic philosophy, not simply Muslim philosophy. Likewise, the contemplative path practiced by the Sufis for attaining personal revelation of higher truth; the poetry of Ḥāfīz (d. 1390), characterised by intoxication and all-consuming path of love, the figurative arts flouting the prohibition on the depiction of the human form as idolatrous and scorned by jurists; and wine drinking valorised as deeply meaningful in itself, as expressive and constitutive of Islam.

In areas from the Balkans to Bengal, Islam prevailed where, along with religious rules and rituals, Muslims focused on, among others, the poetry of Rumi and the rituals of mystical Sufi brotherhoods. Poetry, philosophy, mysticism and drinking wine at parties were designed to generate close unions that were mystical, philosophical and physical. Islam, to Ahmed, is much more than the rules in law books. After analysing documents from the Balkans to Bengal, he demonstrates “Islam” is much more than a religious faith. It is

the name of a human and historical phenomenon whereby and wherein truth and meaning are constituted and distributed in particular ways that are not adequately captured or apprehended by the concept of religion, constituted and embedded, as that term is today, in the historical experience of the relationship of Europeans to Christianity (p. 197).

To Ahmed, Islam is a kind of culture or a civilisation that Muslims need to comprehend. Islam is made, according to Ahmed, through three fundamental components: Pre-text, text and con-text. Pre-text refers to the universal eternal truths of revelation that existed long before the Qur’an. Text refers to the Qur’an and traditions (hadith) of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Con-text is defined as “that whole field or complex or vocabulary of meanings of Revelation that have been produced in the course of the human and historical hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, and which are thus already present as Islam” (p. 356). For Ahmed, an engagement must be conducted within the con-text to be truly “Islamic”.

Ahmed laments that contemporary Islam has become centred on the text at the expense of the pre-text and con-text. He would like Muslims to adopt this model to embrace the paradoxes exemplified by the contradictory postures towards wine drinking and much else. He laments, however, that Muslims

have, in making their modernity, moved decisively away from conceiving of and living 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 the Text of Revelation ... Thus, when modern Muslims encounter statements of Islamic meaning that are made in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text (the ideas of Ibn Sīnā, or of Ibn ‘Arabi, the poetry of Ḥāfīz, miniature paintings, the wine-cup of Jahangir, etc.), they are, by and large, unable to recognise or make sense of these statements as Islam (pp. 515-516).

Muslims must not simply attempt to engage the text of revelation or the pre-text that stands behind it, but in the fact that such engagement occurs through the intervening medium of prior tradition, i.e. the con-text.

Ahmed insists all of the inconsistencies, contradictions and debates, often ignored by scholars as cultural differences, are all Islam. Islam, he insists, is contradictory and coherent. He offers a new way of looking at Islam:

1. He demonstrates very convincingly that the Muslim world is far from being homogeneous and monolithic.
2. He argues strongly that a holistic view of the development of Islam requires emphasising not simply early and classical Islam and its predominantly Arabic heritage, but also the understudied societies of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex.
3. He reminds Muslims not to unjustly undermine the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, but to re-evaluate representation of Islam in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Americas and other Muslim societies.
4. He relinquishes an exclusive emphasis on the legal-prescriptive discourse of the 'ulama' and its associated juristic, exegetical and creedal sources to a much wider embrace of the full diversity of artistic, aesthetic, ethical and speculative expressions of the post-Mongol period.
5. He advises Muslims to overcome their bias in favour of "classical" sources, and the privileging of the 'ulama' as the authority in defining the norms and values of Muslim communities. He was highly critical of the theories that privilege adherence to Islamic law as the determinant of Islamic legitimacy.
6. He defends Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, which portrayed the Prophet and Islam in a derogatory manner. The book was seen by Muslims as a continuation of the tradition of anti-Islamic sentiment in Western literature and its author was declared an infidel. The same author, however, was considered the greatest literary figure in the West and was given many awards, including a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II, for his services to literature.

This is a complex, repetitive and unusual book. However, it has an irresistible attraction, perhaps because, among other things, it challenges the highly legalistic readings of Islamic tradition as well as dethrones the 'ulama as the spokespersons for Islam. Ahmed would have Muslims turn to poetry, works of fiction, art and music to live Islam. Ahmed's vision of Islam is scholarly in its style and rhetoric, and its re-definition of Islam is duly praised, largely in the West. For scholars in the West, *What is Islam?* is "ground-breaking," "field-changing" and the "boldest thing" on Islam ever written.