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Islam Resighted:

A Review Essay of Shahab Ahmed's What is Islam? and Joseph Massad's Islam in Liberalism

Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton University Press, 2015, 624 pp., \$39.50 US (hbk), ISBN 9780691164182.

Joseph A. Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 384 pp., \$40.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780226206226.

Two Metacritical Ploys: Rejectionist and Incrementalist

Both books under review offer metacritical surveys of Islam in a broad arc of references that include major, and a few minor, scholars on the topic of Islam within the academy. It is important to stress the location for most of their references at the outset: “within the academy” means ipso facto that neither author is engaging other public voices who claim to express, or to explain, what is conveyed by invoking “Islam.” Among those who have tried to expand the chorus of voices, both claiming and declaiming Islam, is Northwestern University political scientist, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd. In her book, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religions*,¹ Hurd notes three different approaches to religion in general and Islam in particular: expert, lived, and official perspectives. The distinction is consequential, for despite the multiple differences between Massad and Ahmed, they converge in their audience: other experts who work within, or connect to, major universities of North America and Western Europe. Fellow experts are both the referential resource and the frequent target of their analyses; neither lived religion, the stuff of ethnography and anthropology, nor official claims about Islam by Muslim majority regimes, whether Saudi or Iranian, Pakistani or Indonesian, figure in either book.

While the limits of their authors' outlook may cause some to dismiss the content of these monographs, that reflex would be shortsighted and misguided. Both Massad and Ahmed write from the perch of deep engagement with their subjects. They have read extensively and delved creatively into multiple sources. Their metacritiques in these monographs are in fact but one marker of multiple projects that each envisions. Shahab Ahmed had toiled for years

¹ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

on *What is Islam?* and two other monographs. Alas, he became ill and died on September 17, 2015; shortly after this, the first of his three books, was published (November 2015). Joseph Massad had published two other major monographs before the current volume: *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (2001) and *Desiring Arabs* (2007) as well as an impressive collection of articles, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians* (2006). Early in *Islam in Liberalism*, Massad announces that its sequel will also be its complement. Titled *Genealogies of Islam*, his next monograph will investigate “the intellectual and semantic history of the multiplication of the meanings of Islam since the eighteenth century” (6). It will review the rich intellectual production in Muslim majority societies since the eighteenth-century, including the attention of Muslim actors to “the rise of the question of Islam and democracy” (97 fn.301).

Massad’s next book might seem to be a more logical candidate to compare with Ahmed’s magnum opus than the current one, but in a sense both 2015 books are prolegomena to larger projects. They are metacritical reviews of antecedent authors who have labored on similar tropes, but arrived at unsatisfactory or, at best, provisional analyses. In both cases Massad and Ahmed include *rejectionist critiques*, citing those whose work is to be pilloried and rejected, along with *incrementalist critiques*, granting some fellow academics hopeful, or at least sincere, intent even while noting major aporia from their analyses that now need to be revisited and remedied.

Massad’s Argument: Debunking Liberalism in Several Guises

Though its elaboration is complex, Massad’s argument is simple: liberalism is more than an ideology, it is a process of “othering the Muslim,” that is, making the Muslim other the opposite of the liberal subject, who is at once (Protestant) Christian, (Euro-American) democratic, heteronormative, “sane,” and non-Semitic. Each trajectory of prejudice is carefully traced in this book, not from its creators but from its perpetrators, often scholarly experts on a region, an issue, or an ideology that relates to Islam. While Islam itself is not deemed to be either pure or innocent, *Islam in Liberalism* details “a discourse about the West as a modern category, its despotism, its undemocracy” (19). And so what is offered as Anglo-American liberal doctrine is a calculated deceit with ill intent: it is produced through “the othering of Islam,” projecting certain forms of Islam “in the service of colonial and imperial policies” (109). Not only is liberalism the secular variant of Protestantism (212) but democracy itself is “advanced as *the highest stage of Christianity*,” especially by human rights advocacy groups such as Amnesty International (143; italics in the original). The “universalizing application of English concepts” (241) moreover, has produced nothing short of an “Anglo-American taxonomical and identarian hegemony, if not imperialism” (245).

So many are the villains, so thick the diatribes that it is often quite difficult to decide how to exit the quagmire of interlocking pairs. Occidentalism turns out to be the dyadic sequel to Orientalism: “*Occidentalism is always already Orientalism*” (264), while anti-Semitism is the asymmetric response to “*Semitism, Orientalism, and Zionism*” (341; italics are in the text). The distinctions are important, and Massad is eager to level the playing field, yet when he claims that “the Jewish and the Palestinian Questions have never been other than the Aryan and the Semitic Questions” (341), he portrays a ricocheting series of ideologies, aporia, and agendas that seem to offer no practical remedy.

The benefit of this ambitious, broad gauged metacritique is also its bane, above all, the ubiquitous notations. Metropolitan theories and theorists are reviewed in stunning detail, and false parallels (such as Islam *and* liberalism) are everywhere exposed and eschewed, with

frequent resort to footnotes. Footnotes abound, especially in Chapter Three, “Pre-Positional Conjunctions: Sexuality and/in ‘Islam’”. Here defensiveness about critiques of his earlier monograph, *Desiring Arabs* (2007), suffuses and bloats several footnotes, often making it impossible to separate what is rejectionist from what is incrementalist in Massad’s own critiques. For example, two back-to-back footnotes, fn.130 and fn.131 occupy the equivalent of two full pages of text, 261-263. Not just the small print but the density of detail in description and rebuttal defy easeful reading or ready comprehension.

To be fair to Massad, he signals to the careful reader in an earlier footnote (216 fn.7) that he will parse closely the words of prior critics: although *Desiring Arabs* has received much positive response, he observes that, “it has also elicited hostile and sometimes (unexpectedly) abusive responses by some scholars and activists, often intent on misrepresenting the arguments the book makes. I shall attend to some of these in an effort to explain what is at stake in these scholarly and political disagreements.” Yet one is still wondering why these arguments could not be shoehorned into the text if they are central to the goal of his current monograph, or at least reduced in size and length to make the point cogent and compelling for those readers attentive to intra-mural debates about sexuality and/in Islam.

Ahmed’s Agenda: the Quest for Muslim Meaning Making

We face a different agenda as well as temperament in *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*. No one can approach this enormous book—550 pages of text, with 14 images and 45 pages of works cited—and not feel a sense of amazement as well as bewilderment. Because Shahab Ahmed’s early demise prevents us from engaging a passionate, articulate scholar of all things, persons, projects, and, above all, perspectives linked to Islam, most of the remainder of this review will be dedicated to the benefits but also the difficulties of his work. The last section will return to Massad in order to elicit desiderata for the future.

No other scholar before Ahmed has examined in such detail, with such painstaking attention to nuance, the multiple ways that Islam as a topic has been approached, assessed, compared, and imagined. In one sense, *What Is Islam?*, like *Islam in Liberalism*, takes the form of a discrete set of elaborate book notes or critical reviews, in this case marshaled under three topics: questions, conceptualizations, and reconceptualizations. But there is also a final addendum that revisits Ahmed’s subtitle: the importance of being Islamic. Echoing the famed play by Oscar Wilde, it epitomizes the author’s irony as well as his erudition. In all these pages, with rapt attention to evidence, argument, and outcome, Ahmed critiques his predecessors and also many of his contemporaries in the field of Islamic studies. He assails as a recurrent failure among experts on Islam that: “existing conceptualizations and uses of ‘Islam/Islamic’ do *not* express a coherent object of meaning (or an object of coherent meaning).... Analysts, be they historians, anthropologists, sociologists, or scholars of art or religion, are often frankly unsure of what they mean when they use the terms ‘Islam/Islamic’—or whether they should use the terms at all” (9).

Ahmed seems rejectionist but he is also incrementalist in the critique he mounts. He labors to find a balance between rejectionist and incrementalist strategies of critique in his review of numerous major scholars of Islam: Jacques Waardenburg, John Voll, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Wilfred C. Smith, Abdul Hamid el-Zein, Ahmad Dalal, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Talal Asad, Clifford Geertz, to cite but a few. In some cases he is rejectionist without relief: Hamid Dabashi, Tariq Ramadan, Baber Johansen, Brett Wilson, and Aaron Hughes. For a few, a very few, he offers their arguments as models for the kind of reconstructionist agenda he seeks: Fazlur Rahman, “probably the finest modern scholar of Islamic intellectual history”

(30), J. Christoph Bürgel, “one of the most original and supple-minded scholars of the literary discourses of Muslims” (45), and Ahmet Karamustafa, “the eminent Muslim scholar of Sufism” (137).

Throughout his prolix analysis, Ahmed invokes familiar and unfamiliar tropes from Islamic history to underscore his central point, to wit, that *all* Muslim heroes and epigones, as well as their diverse, unnoted co-religionists, offer “*personal engagements with the contradictory possibilities of truth and meaning*” (101). The point is to avoid sterile dyads like juridical orthodox or Sufi legalist and instead “to produce a reconceptualization of Islam by which and to which difference and contradiction cohere” (152). All oppositional binaries applied to Islam, in his view, have to be eschewed: insider/outsider, religious/secular, modern/pre-modern, authentic/inauthentic, orthodox/heterodox, sacred/profane, and also core/periphery.

Instead, argues Ahmed, one needs to look at the most salient qualities of Muslim meaning-making. The anchor or the basepoint of Islam is neither legal discourse nor legal pluralism but rather social pluralism (“normative pluralism in societies of Muslims”). The initial Revelation of Islam is best understood as Pre-Text (all that existed before Islam), the Text (both the Qur’an and other authoritative texts, including collections of poetry), and Con-Text (spatial as well as temporal, over the broad geographic expanse of Muslim societies from West Africa to Southeast Asia). The most fundamental and recurrent error is to register law at the pinnacle in a hierarchy of truth. One must instead “*conceptualize the law in terms beyond the law itself...within a larger perspective of social and discursive truth, meaning and value*” (455; italics in the original). And to accomplish that task Ahmed suggests a Persianate idiom: *madhhab-i ‘ishq* (i.e., madhhab of Love). To ground “convergence *plus* contradiction” as the core of Muslim identity, Ahmed argues that even though the law—the notion of *shari’ah* or *shari’ah* mindedness—has been overvalued, there needs to be a new, higher law, a more lyrical and inclusive notion of Islam, one he labels *madhhab-i ‘ishq*, literally, a way of moving, going, traveling that is prompted and informed by deep passion or radical love, at once transcendent and immanent. Ahmed acknowledges that *madhhab-i ‘ishq* has ample precedent within Islamic/Persianate poetry (38 fn.99): it can, and should, be traced back to the twelfth century mystic martyr, Ayn-ul-Quzat al-Hamadani, as noted by Husayn Ilahi-Ghomshei.²

Limits to Ahmed’s Dominant Frames

The temporal contrast between Ahmed and Massad is at once evident and consequential. While Massad principally engages the “modern” period (1850 to the present) in the Arab world (with brief excursions into Persian sources and arguments), Ahmed argues that *madhhab-i ‘ishq*, the flagship of Islamic meaning and value, resonates with special force during the period from 1350-1850 and, above all, in the region core to Muslim societies from that period: the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, “extending from the Balkans through Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia down and across Afghanistan and North India to the Bay of Bengal” (73). Beyond religious, cultural, or secular frames of analysis, it is in this region in this time period, argues Ahmed, that we find “*a common paradigm of Islamic life and thought* by which Muslims (and others) imagined, conceptualized, valorized, articulated and gave mutually-communicable *meaning* to their lives in terms of Islam” (75; italics in the original).

² Husayn Ilahi-Ghomshei, “The Principles of the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry,” in *Hafiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry*, Leonard Lewisohn, ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 77-106.

Ahmed is especially harsh on his Harvard colleague Roy Mottahedeh for presuming that premodern language echoes modern day national traits and identities. Persian was not for Iranians only, nor Arabic solely for Arabs. Instead, argues Ahmed, at the end of a half-page footnote that rivals many of Massad's in its length and density, "Persian poetry was construed by the educated Muslim elite of the Balkans-to-Bengal as a universal language of meaning-making belonging fully, integrally, and enfranchisedly to the Persian-reading Muslims of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex as a whole (as was Arabic-language scholarship, or the Arabic Qur'an, construed as belonging to all readers of Arabic)..." (526 fn.245).

Though Ahmed envisages a bold incrementalist critique that morphs into a reconstructionist project for the future of Islamic studies, it is crucial to note two limits to his deeply personal, finely grained reassessment of Islam, Islamic history, and Muslim societies. Partially they can be deduced from *Islam in Liberalism*: the modern period, or at least the liberal project within it, has reshaped what is made of all evidence from prior historical periods and other domains outside Euro-America. Even though *What is Islam?* strives to be universal in scope, it is regional, even local in its evidence, and pre-modern in its focus. The American historian Marshall Hodgson, also revisited and critiqued by Ahmed (157-175), noted the importance of the middle period, but ascribed a critical role to both the classical/formative period (500-1250) and the modern period (1800-present). Curiously, both Ahmed and Massad criticize Hodgson for, above all, his use of "Islamicate." Massad harks on its misuse: his sole citation frames a rejectionist critique of "Islamicate" as deployed by two Iranian American scholars. Massad skewers Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi for their co-edited volume, *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*,³ principally because "Islamicate," in their work, assumes a parochial arc: since it is not a term indigenous to any Persian speakers outside Anglo-America, "this act of (re)translation therefore turns out not to be a translation at all, but rather a universalizing application of English concepts" (241).

By contrast, Ahmed makes much of Hodgson's distinction between "Islamic" and "Islamicate" in order to rebut the latter, yet he also uses Islamicate in reformulating Islam, or at least Islamic cosmopolitanism, which he depicts as an expression of the convergence of Muslim and non-Muslim values as well as aspirations. Ahmed wrestles at length with the categories "religion" and "culture," refusing to designate "Islamic" as "religion" and "Islamicate" as "culture." Yet he quotes Hodgson himself urging that the two categories should be applied as fluid procedures rather than rigid epistemes. "In some cases," argues Hodgson, "the distinction [between religion and culture] is unimportant, and the choice between the terms 'Islamic' and 'Islamicate' may be a matter of emphasis."⁴

Ahmed also remains deeply indebted to Hodgson in his concept of space. In attempting his own geographical resighting of Islam, Ahmed demarcates a new center of Islamic civilization, one he labels the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, but this revisionist terminology is inspired by and derived from Hodgson, albeit without acknowledgment. Above all, it was Hodgson the visionary who, in the late 1960s, was sensitive to Westocentric nomenclature and therefore emphatically rejected "Middle East" or "Near East" and coined instead "Nile-to-Oxus" as a more apt designation for the core region of Islamic(ate) civilization.⁵ The

³ Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, eds., *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 95 as quoted in Ahmed on page 170 fn.131.

⁵ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1, 60-61.

Balkans-to-Bengal complex should be debated for its geo-spatial limits, but its antecedent in the search for resonant neologisms to depict Islamic(ate) civilization is Nile-to-Oxus.

Indirectly Ahmed acknowledges the temporal fault line in his own approach. In the second half of the final chapter (514-541), he pivots toward an assessment of modern Islam, devoting six pages with four images to the Saudi/Wahhabi/Salafi rejection of a pluralist vision of Islam. Ahmed sees the Saudis as representative of a trend throughout Muslim societies: “the considerable loss of the multi-dimensional spatiality of Revelation is increasingly the *leitmotif* of modern Islam” (537). One must ask whether this assessment is broad and nuanced enough to be persuasive. Excluding the official and the lived perspectives,⁶ Ahmed focuses on the expert, namely, those who share with him a location in the academy and its fascination with the literary, textual, historical, and ethnographic trajectory of Islam.

In the one instance before the final chapter where Ahmed looks at Islamists, he challenges the Stanford political scientist, Donald Emmerson, a specialist in Southeast Asia, and devotes almost three pages to undercutting the premise of Emmerson’s argument (148-151). Yet the issue which Emmerson engages—how to move beyond the “good Muslim”/“bad Muslim dichotomy”—is one taken up by several other scholars, most notably Mahmood Mamadani. The latter’s book, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (2005), makes a much better test case for evaluating the binary semiotics of popular discourse on modern Islam; its inclusion would have expanded Ahmed’s argument with evidence not only on the “modern” origins of Muslim terror and political Islam as categories, but also on the colonial/imperial background to the cold war, proxy wars, and now, since 9/11, direct wars waged in Muslim majority countries.

Geertz on Muslim Meaning Making

The major disappointment in Ahmed’s *vade mecum* on scholarship about Islam, however, is the unexamined origins of the central word to his own reprise of Muslim pluralism—hermeneutical, social, and practical. If his mode of critique moves more easily and frequently from rejectionist to incrementalist than does Massad’s, it is due to the stress he places on “meaning.” “Meaning” is as much the key word for *What is Islam?* as “liberal(ism)” is for *Islam in Liberalism*. Making Muslim meaning resonates through the book, and then occupies a central place in the final mandate: “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” (546).

When such emphasis is placed on one word, the reader longs to know its genealogy. Where does it occur, and why is it so important? Again, the actual source complicates but also enriches Ahmed’s shrewd analysis. The proximate source is Clifford Geertz. Geertz prized “meaning”: often related to “experience” and “action,” he projects it as giving philosophical depth to both. Justifying his approach as semantic in *Islam Observed*, Geertz claimed that only a semantic approach “is concerned with the collectively created patterns of meaning the individual uses to give form to experience and point to action.”⁷

⁶ See Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom*.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 68.

Geertz's approach has been both lauded and criticized. In *Islam in Liberalism* he is mentioned but once, and there to compare his view of "translation across cultures" with that of Talal Asad (237). By contrast, the critique of Geertz mounted by Ahmed derives from several other, previous critics of Geertz in general and *Islam Observed* in particular, yet Ahmed retains, even as he develops, the stress on meaning (249). Geertz exemplifies Ahmed's dominant tendency throughout, to move between rejectionist and incrementalist critique of the major, and also minor, figures he interrogates. Geertz, however, did not originate the emphasis on meaning in the study of culture. Instead, he developed it from his earlier, undergraduate fascination with philosophy and especially the preeminent American pragmatist, Charles Peirce. It was Peirce who, in opposition to Kant, produced "the first deliberate theory of meaning in modern times."⁸ It is crucial to know that Peirce favored pragmatism over idealism. Indeed, he developed meaning as a logical technique to define pragmatism, so much so that pragmatism itself becomes "merely a method of ascertaining the meanings of hard words and of abstract concepts."⁹

And so the quest for Muslim meaning-making has not just a decidedly modern genesis but also one with much deeper roots in the pragmatic turn than Ahmed acknowledges. Muslim meaning-making is both obscured and enriched by Ahmed's extraordinary exploration, marked, as it is, by numerous, often unexpected twists and turns. Though Oscar Wilde only makes a cameo appearance, he would be pleased to see one of his several aphorisms cited as a gloss on not just the past but also the future of Islamic cosmopolitanism: "The cosmopolitanism of Muslims is their oldest tradition; it has been going on now for fourteen hundred years" (145-146). Capacious Islamic cosmopolitanism, it would seem, is a semaphore of hope, one put at risk less by present day Western manipulations of Islam within a sinister liberal agenda, as Massad argues, than by contemporary proponents and agents of Islamic literalism, absent from Massad.

Massad on Wilde, Democracy and Citizenship

Ironically, Massad also cites Oscar Wilde. Like Ahmed his is a solo citation of the great Victorian playwright. It is, in fact, the same citation from the same play: *A Woman of No Importance*. But for Massad the citation, rather than a gloss opening out to the prospect of Islamic cosmopolitanism, instead proves how deeply flawed, and narcissistically impaired, is the notion of antiquity in Euro-American, or more specifically Anglo-American, cultural history. "Oscar Wilde," observes Massad, "has famously quipped: 'The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilization goes they are in their second.' This age contrast, or rather, this dual positioning of the United States on a temporal axis of youth and old age, seems...to serve ideological culturalist purposes, and not only psychological and narcissistic ones, namely the not-so-implicit claim that there is something particular and fundamental about American white Christian Protestant culture that rendered the US republic a democracy from the outset" (32).

As much as one can and should admire the rigor of Massad's rolodex of rejectionist critiques, one also longs to find the other side, let us call it, the upside, or incrementalist, critique, lodged next to the rejectionist critique but also allowing for some future hope attached to those who, though liberal, may be seeking to find support and expand "the deep,

⁸ Justus Buchler, "Introduction," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), xi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 271.

principled congruence between liberal and Islamic conceptions of justice, the good, and social solidarity”¹⁰ apart from and beyond forms of cultural hegemony or domination, either historical or contemporary.

That alternative vista, like its frame quotation, comes from Andrew March’s *Islam and Liberal Citizenship*. The title of March’s book anticipates Massad’s next work in that all the actors he interrogates are Arab Muslim writers of the past half-century. The subtitle to his book hints at the agenda that also permeates Ahmed’s work, namely, “the search for an overlapping consensus.” Though it is a Rawlsian ethical project, it uses moral reasoning to take account of critics at multiple levels while still striving to find convergence, even when he (March) disagrees with some of his Muslim subjects, including Abdullahi an-Na’im, Rashid al-Ghannushi, and Tariq Ramadan. Massad’s next book, *Genealogies of Islam*, will hopefully provide a trajectory beyond diatribe into the broader goals of citizenship, to wit, how to define belonging, loyalty, solidarity and participation within a global community where Muslim subjects are autonomous actors, not just ciphers lost amid a neo-colonial hegemonic discourse and practice that precludes either freedom or justice, much less a just world order, as possible outcomes.

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¹⁰ Andrew F. March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

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