

## ***Book Reviews***

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

Reviewer: Mohammed Wasim Naser, Department of Economics, International Islamic University Malaysia.  
Email: [waseemnaser@hotmail.com](mailto:waseemnaser@hotmail.com).

What is Islamic about Islamic philosophy, Sufism, Islamic art or poetry? This book begins with a series of questions that seek to alert us to the task of defining “Islam”. Seemingly provocative, the final question is whether wine drinking, prevalent and often venerated among Muslims, can be possibly construed as Islamic? The reasons for these questions, the author states, are threefold. First, to conceptualise unity in the face of outright contradictions that confronts us; second, that these contradictory claims were made by Muslims who were not marginal, but at the very centre of socio-political and intellectual discourses; and finally, to show that these contradictions cannot be understood under a binary of religion versus secular/culture.

To this end, he calls for a “suspension of received categories of distinction” (p. 73) in English academic discussions of Islam. The book thereby attempts to re-conceptualise Islam as a “human and historical phenomenon” (p. 73) that is sensitive to contradictory normative claims of what constitutes Islam throughout history. His archaeological site for this study is the “Balkans to Bengal complex” (p. 73) which immediately preceded modernity, a site he considers to be a major and dominant historical paradigm of Islam but has unfortunately not been recognised as such. An exploration of this site, he argues, would allow us to gain perspectives with which we could perceive other sites with a different light.

With copious quotations and references, the author first analyses the existing conceptualisations of Islam among English academics and comes to the conclusion that they are ominously narrow and misleading. The inability until now to conceptualise Islam coherently, he contends, should not result in scepticism of its possibility, but rather in the possibility that it is because of the “conceptual insufficiency of our own language and thought” (p. 108). The book therefore aims to provide “a new language for the conceptualisation of Islam” (p. 108). While admitting the futility of searching for an essence of Islam as a concept, he maintains that it does not imply that Islam “as an analytical category dissolves” (p. 135). The challenge for him is not one of essentialising, but one of coherence; a challenge confronted by social scientists when analysing Muslims, who insist that there is such a thing as Islam but who also considerably disagree among themselves about what it is.

Shahab’s re-conceptualisation starts from what he considers an idea universally held and experienced among Muslims. This idea is their consciousness of being part of an “isolable and bounded domain of meaningful phenomenon” (p. 141) – what could be stated as the “Ummah”. It is in this local and supra-local space that he identifies Islam as a space of “mutual intelligibility and sympathy...for shared interpersonal meaning” (p. 142). Yet Shahab digresses from categorising this space under the rubric of religion. He convincingly argues how the category of “religion”, derived from the history of Christianity, mostly constrains an analysis of Islam by wrongly locating what is salient to it. This universalising rubric of religion, according to him, misses the point that it is not about resemblance but rather about whether differences can “meaningfully cohere without resembling each other” (p. 243).

The influence of Talal Asad and his idea of “discursive tradition” are clearly evident throughout the book. The goal of historical analysis is to systematically explore the differences perceived in the world and to come up with concepts that can explain or describe these differences. But Shahab reads Asad’s notion of authority as predominantly prescriptive, to which he posits another type of authority – “the authority to explore” for oneself rather than prescribe for others. It is in these differing authorities that Shahab sees Islam as a discursive tradition (p. 282). An illuminating example he brings up is that of the practice of “*Kajkulahi*” (p. 210), a habit along the “Balkans to Bengal complex”

of wearing one's cap or turban in a crooked manner. This was often done by artists or Sufis as an act of openly proclaiming defiance to, or independence from, accepted norms of a society. He convincingly shows how *Kajkulahi* fails to map into any notion of secular or profane, as these acts were done with their Islamic identities intact.

From this line of thought, he argues that the social, discursive and praxial complexity within Islam makes it a form of idiom or shared language through which meaning is produced. Islam, in effect, becomes both the "means and the meaning" (p. 323). For analytical purposes, he conceptualises this act of meaning making by Muslims as a "hermeneutical engagement" with the "Pretext, Text and Context" of Revelation (p. 405). The pretext for Islamic philosophers was predominantly reason, while for the Sufis it was existence. The context becomes the social mechanisms and structures that support meaning making. This matrix is brilliantly illuminated by him through Amir Khusraw, the 14th century musical genius and poet of the Indian subcontinent. Shahab portrays Khusraw as using music to engage and experience the "truths" of the pretext (p. 429), while using the language of the text to articulate it to his context through poetry. This act of meaning making thereby becomes part of the larger context and recognisably Islamic.

Shahab then laments how modern Islam has become very much centred on the text at the expense of the pretext and context. This has rendered the majority of modern Muslims in a "cognitive and epistemic condition" (p. 516) of being unable to coherently conceptualise their relationship with the pre-modern world. The consequence of this approach was to drastically reduce the multi-dimensionality and spatiality of revelation as a phenomenon. In effect, modern Islamic calls to return to the "pristine" period of the "Salaf" are considered by him a form of de-historicising in order to simplify the complexity of Islam. The effect is a reduced hermeneutical engagement and an increasing difficulty to conceptualise much of pre-modern Islam as genuinely Islamic.

The book, running well over 500 pages, is a monumental work that deserves high praise. The meticulousness of his work is manifest throughout the book. He even took pains to translate by himself every line of poetry or prose that he cites, be it in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, or even Malay. Yet it is not clear who the intended audience is. It would

appear too specialised and demanding for those outside the field of Islamic studies. Those within it, on the other hand, would most probably find it rather repetitive and often pedantic, with extensive extracts and quoted passages that do not seem necessary.

Nevertheless, the arguments made in the book are well crafted and would leave any reader with a great deal of points to ponder. One such point is about the concept of religion. If Islam is a term that can be conceptualised based on a shared consciousness among Muslims, could not the term religion be re-conceptualised as well, based on a shared understanding of being religious? This argument can then be extended to any comprehensive doctrine or idea, and, crucially to the term humanity. So under what pretext can any activity or person be identified or designated primarily as “Islamic”, rather than “humanistic” or “liberal”? The book does not appear to answer this question. The difficulty here could be due to Shahab’s insistence on conceptualising Islam as a “human and historical phenomenon” (p. 5), with the consequence of side-lining what the vast majority of Muslims would consider fundamental – the “Divine phenomenon”. Shahab states in the beginning that the theoretical question of “What is Islam” is different from the theological one (p. 6). Yet, there is not much explanation of what the differences are, or whether they are incommensurable. Without a reference to divinity, any human or historical act would lose considerable meaning under Islam.

Finally, while the book fills an enormous gap in the historical understanding of Islam by looking at particular forms of Islamic lives in the “Balkans to Bengal complex”, one wonders how the conclusions would be if the analysis was carried further into history. An example is the case of “orthodoxy” that Shahab interprets as an amalgam of the philosophical-Sufi thinking along the “Balkans to Bengal complex” (p. 73). Going further back in history, this idea of orthodoxy becomes problematic. Articulation was not as prominent among intellectuals and emphasis was given to praxis. A case in point is how the earliest Sufis were mostly *Hanbalī*, a position that reflected their disapproving attitude towards overt rationalism and speculation. Added to that was the predominance of oral transmission and a resulting effect on pedagogy.

The success of this book is in bringing up these contentions in the reader. While the book began with a provocative question regarding

wine drinking, it ends by provoking in us questions that are much more salient. An alumnus of IIUM Kulliyah of Law, Shahab Ahmed tragically passed away months prior to the release of the book. May Allah provide him with peace and happiness in the next world.

---

**Governance in South, Southeast and East Asia: Trends, issues and challenges.** Edited by Ishtiaq Jamil, Salahuddin M. Aminuzzaman, and Sk. Tawfique M. Haque. London: Springer, 2015, pp. 285, ISBN: 978-3-319-15218-9.

Reviewer: Norhaslinda Bt. Jamaudin, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: [linda@iium.edu.my](mailto:linda@iium.edu.my).

This book offers a comparative analysis on governance in South, Southeast, and East Asian countries. It provides extensive conceptual, theoretical, and empirical discussions on governance with rigorous comparative studies of how governance is practised in different countries across those contexts. The authors present broad analyses on the discrepancies of governance reforms on the basis of real and practical problems and examine the factors that drive and challenge governance based administrations. The tune of the book is to measure the impact of governance on public management reforms, country developments, and economic growths. The by-product of the adoption of the governance model is thoroughly analysed. The book is divided into 15 chapters, opening with a conceptual discussion on governance. The chapter is completed with arguments on the relevance of the governance model in South Asia and beyond. Descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory analyses are presented using reliable primary and secondary data with sound methodological foundations.

The book discusses the concept and model of governance based on specific indicators as developed by international bodies. Governance entails multi-dimensional indicators to measure notions such as good governance, sound governance, network governance, and so forth. The concept signifies a network of interconnectedness of government, private sectors, civil society organisations, and the public. The