Merguerian, Gayane Karen, and Afsaneh Najmabadi. "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?" *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 485–508.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Peirce, Leslie. *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Peirce, Leslie. *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Shaikh, Sa'diyya. *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabī, Gender, and Sexuality*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Silay, Kemal. "Singing in His Words: Ottoman Women Poets and the Power of Patriarchy." In *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*, edited by Madeline C. Zilfi, 197–213. New York: Brill, 1997.

Truillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon, 1995.

Tucker, Judith. *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929.

Ze'evi, Dror. *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

IS ORIENTALISM ISLAMIC?

Mohamed Amer Meziane

Concluding *What Is Islam?*, Shahab Ahmed defines Islam as "meaning-making for the self in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muhammad."[1] Something is therefore Islamic "to the extent that it is made meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement." Revelation, Ahmed argues, is not reducible to "Text" but constitutes a reality that exceeds textuality both as "Pre-text" and as "Con-text" (405). Since many orientalists also make Revelation to Muhammad meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement, does it mean that orientalism should therefore be deemed "Islamic"? By raising this polemical question, this essay argues that if Islam is reduced to hermeneutical engagement, orientalism becomes problematically included within the Islamic tradition. I will thus argue that the definition of Islam formulated by Ahmed makes us incapable of distinguishing between orientalist definitions of Islam and the Islamic definitions of Islam that are articulated by Muslims themselves in the argumentative spaces of their tradition.

In asking whether orientalism is Islamic, I do not wish to provide any positive answer to this question but to examine the dialectical paradoxes that stem from Ahmed's definition. This question cannot be ignored, in my view, when one is to address the very act of defining Islam in a book that is not written for Muslims but mainly for Western-based scholars. What I want to suggest is that it might not be possible to construct any "post-orientalist" definition of Islam without enacting a sustained critique of orientalism. Because most theorists mistakenly tend to assume that such a critique has been exhausted by Edward W. Said's book,[2] this necessary interdependence between construction and critique is too often overlooked. While writing about Islam in the allegedly post-orientalist space of Western academia, we might be more confined by the limitations of existing critiques of orientalism than we think.[3]

When Ernest Renan famously defined Islamic philosophy as "heretical" and non-Islamic, he certainly was not formulating the kind of critical argument that Al-Ghazali was making against Islamic philosophers. My argument is not only that because of its generality Ahmed's definition of Islam fails to make sense of this crucial difference by confusing orientalist and Islamic definitions of "orthodoxy." It is also that such a failure is symptomatically interesting, for it indirectly makes something of orientalism manifest and visible, something that the legacy of Said and post-colonialism tends to obscure. As I wish to demonstrate, it allows us to reexamine orientalism differently by deepening its critique through the following questions: Is Renan a failed Ghazali? Is the orientalist a pseudo-Islamic theologian presupposing definitions of Islamic "orthodoxy" and "heresy" while claiming a secular neutrality? Hence, is Islamophobia a *repressed desire to convert to Islam* displaying itself as a fear of an Islamic invasion? Indeed, one could ask provocatively: if orientalism and liberal democracies are secular and non-Islamic, where does their obsessive need to talk about and decipher the "essence of Islam" come from?

In the conclusion of this essay, I will also raise a set of philosophical questions: Is a concept of Islam reducible to a *definition* of what Islam *is*? Can one define Islam without defining its essence, and, if so, can a definition of Islam be articulated outside the Islamic tradition itself? This essay thus questions whether it is possible to think about Islam without defining its alleged *essence*, as it is often assumed in the Aristotelian tradition. I will argue that this question belongs to the practice of philosophy, or *falsafa*. Instead of trying to define Islam

as an object of study within the secular disciplines of Western academia, I suggest that one might have to challenge the philosophical assumptions of modern anthropological knowledge before the reality of Islam can be conceptualized. For this reason, I do not wish to defend any preexisting anthropology of Islam defined as a discursive tradition against Ahmed's definition. Instead, I want to suggest that "thinking Islam" *might require that we think differently*.

A Question of Realism

The reality of Islam seems to be vindicated by the unity of an idea that Muslims do share around the world. Because disagreements among Muslims as Muslims make sense only within Islam, the plurality of Islamic interpretations and practices vindicates the reality of Islam as a coherent unity rather than the vanishing of Islam into manifold Muslim lives.

Where does this idea exist if not through what Muslims say and do? If this idea is certainly inseparable from the discourses and practices of Muslims, it cannot be merely reduced to them. The main interest of Ahmed's erudite and synthetic book, in my view, is to bring *metaphysical* questions to the center of Islamic studies *without recognizing them*. Ahmed rightly wants to question two equally orientalist solutions: the essentialist and the anti-essentialist hypotheses. The essentialist argues that Islam is an immutable structure that is defined by its incapacity to separate politics and religion and that determines the destiny of Muslim societies. However central to orientalism this position is, it is mistakenly identified with orientalism per se when it is wrongly argued that orientalism simply negates the diversity of Islam by positing abstract essences beyond the existing plurality of Muslims and Arabs. The anti-essentialist argues that there is no such thing as Islam but that there only exists a plurality of Islam(s) and Muslims. Needless to say, secular critiques of orientalism such as Said's have more often than not paved the way to such denial of what it actually means to be a Muslim and to be committed to Islam as an idea that necessarily *exceeds* the reality of *this world*. The limitation of such critiques is made visible in the way in which they tend to assume that asserting the very existence of Islam, as Muslims do, would be an essentialist claim of orientalist knowledge. Both sides of this debate are part of orientalism's legacy because it is the problem-space in which this debate can be articulated that constitutes this legacy.

Is orientalism a theological reduction of human behavior to eternal essences, something that the critique should dismiss as "religious"? Arguably, the erasure of realities that are deemed "non-existent" in this world, such as Islam, and their explanations as effects of worldliness constitute a crucial part of modern orientalism and knowledge. This erasure of Islam might still be the condition under which liberalism, even its postcolonial form, defends Muslims *as dehumanized subjects* and never *as Muslims*. My argument is that Ahmed fails to challenge this legacy because, like many others, he never questions the idea according to which a secular rejection of metaphysics and critique of essentialism in the name of archival sources and cultural pluralism challenge orientalism and colonial knowledge.

Thinking at the Border of Islam

Let me try to demonstrate this point through a thought. During the 1860s, the French imperial policy urged Muslims to read the Quran as a purely religious book that had to be separated from politics. Muslims had to abandon the sharia, redefined as the native's "Law of personal status," in order to become "civilized" citizens. Is this French colonial reformist project "Islamic"? If, following Ahmed, one defines Islam simply as a hermeneutical engagement, one has to assert that this reformist project, being exploratory, is therefore "Islamic." Through its counselors such as Ismaÿl Urbain, the French Empire does formulate an injunction to interpret the Quran by articulating the Text and the Context. Arguably, orientalists engage with the Con-text of the Quran, since most of their work consists in reading the Islamic as a result of pre-Islamic oriental sources that they consider violently denied by Islam. Orientalists also hermeneutically engage with Con-text when they argue that the meaning of the Quran and the Sunna has to be deciphered in relation to what happened historically during the time of the Prophet in the Arab Peninsula. One might still object that orientalists do not engage with the Pre-text of the Revelation. However, when Goethe wrote the *Western-Eastern Divan* and presented Hafiz and wine drinking not only as major traces of Persian religion within Islam and Sufism but as the enlightened spirit of the Orient, was he not connecting the Con-text of Islam with the Pre-text of Revelation? Indeed, Goethe and leading German idealists did think of Revelation as a Pre-textual event that is obscurely represented through religious practices. If Islam is hermeneutical engagement, does it mean that Hegel's enthusiastic praise of Rumi as a poetic expression of the supra-textual speculative Truth of Revelation should be deemed "Islamic," as some of Hegel's Christian enemies argued?

Secular states, one might add, also are increasingly engaged in processes of interpretation. If the "Islamic" is a hermeneutical engagement that makes meaning for the self, *does it mean that the French secular state is increasingly becoming an Islamic state* by defining the *hijab* as an ostentatious religious sign of Islam while defining the *niqab* as non-Islamic, thus treating it as a matter of security and public order? Is the "reform of Islam" against foreign "Salafi" Islam a hermeneutical engagement with Con-text against Text-centered "orthodox" Islam? One might object that orientalist hermeneutical engagements are not part of a process of meaning making for the self. Nevertheless, reading a text is a process of meaning making for a reader who also happens to be a self. Therefore, *does it mean that a self can be "Islamic" without having to act as a Muslim*? If Plato's and Aristotle's ethical and political concepts were translatable into the Islamic tradition and capable of becoming Islamic, is it not precisely because the vast number of Muslims who did not read philosophy had already cultivated virtues as part of their commitment to Islam, as part of what it means to be and act *as a Muslim*?

In other words, the question of orthodoxy as a process cannot be dismissed too easily. Indeed, can one define what "being a Muslim" is through hermeneutical engagement with Revelation without implicitly defending an alternative Islamic orthodoxy against other "orthodox" Text-centered forms of Islam? Can one reject, as Ahmed does, orthodoxy as a narrow criterion of what is Islamic while defending Sufism and Islamic philosophy as engagements with Pre-text against Text-centered Wahhabism without enacting a performative contradiction? (Cf. 269–73, 532–35.) My answer to this last question would be negative.

Redefining Orientalism

These questions are part of a method that directs our attention to processes by which the non-Islamic surreptitiously becomes "Islamic." These questions do not help us provide any "new" definition of Islam, but they might help us rethink how orientalism works more carefully than we have done before. Instead of being reduced to Christianity, secularism, or modern knowledge, orientalism could thus be reconceptualized as constant interferences in the space of Islam, intruding upon it by defining one "heretical" school as being more acceptable than the others, influencing debates and intensifying disagreements without acknowledging it. The Salafi-Sufi divide is simply one instance of how Western knowledge tends to divide Islam itself.

Orientalist definitions of Islam always presuppose a concept of Islamic orthodoxy but can never recognize that they do. Although they do not explicitly assert what Islamic orthodoxy is, they do *presuppose* a definition of orthodoxy as soon as they identify something, whether a state or a school, as being inherently Islamic or, on the contrary, as being inherently un-Islamic.

One might object that boundaries of Islam are increasingly blurred in a globalized world. The ambiguous fluidity of circulating hybrid cultures certainly makes discourses *on* Islam and Islamic discourses increasingly difficult to differentiate. Until Islam exists as a space in which Muslims not only *have the power to determine what is Islamic or not* but also to live in conformity to Islam as a "norm" that they obey rather than as an abstract definition, differences between Islamic discourses and discourses on Islam will nevertheless continue to exist and make sense. Muslims certainly disagree in time and space over what Islam is, but since virtually all traditions are spaces of internal contradictions, the mere existence of disagreement does not specify the *singularity* of Islam. In other words, why is Islam a *distinctive* space of disagreement? Is it because the very idea of the Church is made impossible in Islam? Hence is the very idea of Islam simply understandable without any comparison with Christianity and any reference to the doctrine of the Trinity?

Some Metaphysical Questions

Ahmed is looking for a definition of Islam that would include contradiction as "internal" to Islam. By so doing, he leaves a crucial question aside: *how* does Islam actually *exist*? Since the coherence of Islam cannot be reduced to an essence, and since its definition is not the formulation of a particular orthodoxy that could be decipherable outside the Islamic tradition, where does this space exist in the world if not in the very process through which norms are enunciated and also criticized by Muslims? Does it mean that Islam is a totality including *all* contradictions historically occurring between Muslims or that tradition actually exists *as* an irresolvable contradiction, as what post-Hegelian negative dialecticians would refer to as a constitutive failure?

A definition of Islam that would be something other than a pseudotheological definition of a specific Islamic orthodoxy transformed into a concept of Islam per se might thus engage with the following question: can a concept of Islam be something other than a definition of its essence? If one argues, as I do, that the reality of Islam is not reducible to a single essence, then

philosophical questions arise: what exactly is a coherent space that is irreducible to any of its human expressions by Muslims and non-Muslims alike? Since the act of defining Islam is already a crucial part of Islam itself and of what Muslims do, Islam necessarily unfolds as excess: as exceeding any possible reduction to a particular definition of Islam. In other words, the coherent reality of Islam might not be exhaustible by any definition of Islam as an *essence*. The reality of Islam might be thought of as the coherence not only of a discursive tradition but of a *space to which Muslims belong*, a discursive space that itself unfolds into multiple spaces.

There is an interesting attempt to construct the concept of Islam as a hierarchy of spaces in Ahmed's book. However, Ahmed seems not to address a crucial issue: that through such a construction, he is already making an ontological statement. Can Islam be defined as such if one does not attribute a reality to Revelation beyond its human experience? Should Revelation be thought of as being real *only for Muslims*? Can Islam be conceptualized as "meaningful" without being deciphered as the symbol of a secular truth that Muslims call *Allah* but that "really" is a secular absolute such as Humanity or Nature? Can the concept of Islam be defined without attributing a reality to God's uniqueness?

Ahmed argues that, Islam being a hierarchy of spaces, the Truth unfolds as a plurality of hierarchized spaces, which makes internal contradictions within Islam "coherent." If a hierarchy of spaces makes discourses mutually compatible *for the scholar*, can disagreements between Muslims still be seen as relevant and "meaningful"? Does it mean that the scholar who knows that contradictions are in fact "coherent" *is "more Islamic" than the Muslims who disagree with one another*, as colonial anthropology precisely claims? Ahmed is right to assert that Islam is not reducible to textuality; although one might doubt that "Salafism," or any other Islamic movement for that matter, reduces Islam to Text and that only Sufis and Islamic philosophers do not. However, I would suggest that Pre-text and Context are still Text-centered notions, since they do *refer* to textuality. If the Quran itself is not reducible to a text but is better understood as a recitation that is embodied through the acts of a sensible body, what might the notion of "Pre-text" even mean?[4] Hence my final question: *Is reciting embodiment understandable as hermeneutical engagement?*

Conclusion

Islam is not a territorial space. Although they are being constantly redefined and are never eternally fixed, Islam does have constitutive limits. Change *in* Islam is less the vindication of an essential fluidity than the very *process* of "orthodoxy" itself, *for the lack of a better word*. After all, fluidity and becoming are among the most abstract concepts of discourse, for asserting that something *always changes* also means that one posits its immobility.

Mohamed Amer Meziane is a postdoctoral research fellow at Columbia University. His work focuses on empire and secularization in nineteenth-century Europe and North Africa.

Notes

1. Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 405. Hereafter cited in the text.

2. Said, *Orientalism*.

3. For a recent critique of the humanist and liberal assumptions of Said, see Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*.

4. See Diagne, "Of Reciting and Reading"; and Asad, *Secular Translations*.

References

Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

Asad, Talal. *Secular Translations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. "Of Reciting and Reading." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 3 (2015): 666–71.

Hallaq, Wael. *Restating Orientalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978.