

were in fact conducting *jihad*. On the Christian side, the pretense was that these soldiers were “slaves” of the king rather than Muslim mercenaries. Fancy, *Mercenary Mediterranean*.

13. Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam*.
14. Babaie et al., *Slaves of the Shah*.
15. Kinra, “Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility.”
16. Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl*, 3: 627.

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THE COHERENCE OF CONTRADICTION

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In one of his traditions, the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, highlighted the power of words when he said, “Indeed, there is magic in eloquence.”¹ Shahab Ahmed exhibits this magic when he charmingly advances a radically new way of understanding Islam in his 2016 book, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Ahmed sets out to establish Islam as “a historical and human phenomenon . . . in its plentitude and complexity” and hence to “conceptualize unity [in Islam] not in diversity but in the face of outright contradiction.”² To exemplify the enormity of the contradiction he seeks to reconcile, Ahmed says that wine drinking, which is clearly prohibited in the Quran and Sunnah and which is categorically denounced in *fiqh* (juridical) discourses, should be approached as Islamic because there has been a “mutually-constitutive relationship between wine and Islam in history” (67). The insightfulness with which he fits together various conflicting aspects of Islam will provide lessons beyond Islam. Before European colonialism downsized custom to craft customary law, African societies, including non-Muslim societies, had, as Yusuf Bala Usman notes, diverse traditions that “were quite distinct and some of whose elements were actually conflicting and contradictory.”³ Africanists can pick lessons from Ahmed’s reconciliation of contradiction in Islam to study how conflicting African traditions cohered.

Reconciling Contradiction

Let me shed light on Ahmed’s project using one of his examples—wine. His idea is not that wine was seen as lawful, for those who say that it is lawful and those who say that it is unlawful are the same, given that they both make their verdicts in terms of the law. Ahmed wants us to think of Islam outside the parameters of the Islamic text and Islamic law if we are to recognize the Islamic character of beliefs and practices that may be prohib-

ited in the Islamic text but valorized as Islamic across time and space. Interestingly, he moves beyond the Five Pillars, including the *shahadah*, and proposes an understanding of Islam that would include even “idolatry” as an Islamic practice! (28). To establish the Islamicity of the truth that contradicts the truth of the Islamic text, Ahmed finds a source of Islamic truth that is not the text. Unlike Talal Asad, who begins from the text (Qur’an and Sunnah), Ahmed begins from the “Unseen Reality” he calls the “Pre-text” and then proceeds to the “Text” and finally to the “Con-text.” (350). To notice these different sources and layers of truth in Islam is to realize how the two contradictory attitudes toward wine drinking become equally Islamic.

Toward the end, Ahmed holds modernity, including European colonialism, capitalism, the nation-state, science, empiricism, rationalism, and others (514–15), responsible for the “downsizing of Revelation” (527) and for establishing Islam as a predominantly fiqh and text-driven phenomenon in which the Pre-text and sometimes even the Con-text are no longer sources of Islamic meaning. Let me begin with this claim on modernity.

Fiqh in the Premodern and Modern Periods

Unlike Mahmood Mamdani’s native, whose subjectivity is shaped through the colonial state structure of indirect rule,⁴ it is not clear how modernity produces Ahmed’s fiqh-oriented Muslim. Whereas Ahmed notes that the modern “state is entirely a law-made entity” (530), he does not explain how this reality of the state—and indeed other aspects of modernity—has penetrated the Muslim body and psyche to entrench fiqh in just 150 years as virtually the only meaningful Islamic discourse. If indeed the “Sufi-philosophical amalgam” was as prevalent as he depicts it, what particular modern structures, instruments, or mechanisms have wiped it out almost completely in such a short time? Even if we assume that Ahmed has in mind Michel Foucault’s web of institutions such as the prison, hospital, school, and so on, the explanation would still be lacking. Mamdani has warned us against deploying Foucault in “the colonies where the rural population lived beyond the reach of these modern institutions.”⁵ Ahmed gives modernity the power to produce Islam in supposedly unprecedented terms without giving a clue on the production process.

In a separate 2017 book, Ahmed ascribes the production of Islamic truth in the premodern period to the “hadith movement.” In *Before Orthodoxy*, the hadith—and fiqh—society conceived and universal-

ized with almost absolute success the rejection of the facticity of the Satanic-verses incident purposely to invent an “infallible and impeccable” representation of the Prophet. The hadith and fiqh society, Ahmed says, needed such a faultless Prophet if they were to succeed in their “cultural project” of prescribing the conduct of Muslims based on the example of the Prophet.⁶ Not even the “Sufi-philosophical amalgam,” which Ahmed claims presided triumphant in vast lands of Islam, could keep the hadith and fiqh “orthodoxizers” from universally establishing their new truth (dismissal of the Satanic-verses incident).

In *What is Islam?*, however, there is no reference to the universalizing power of this hadith and fiqh society. Instead, the power to shape and universalize Islamic truth suddenly shifts to modernity. To be fair, Ahmed, in several footnotes, refers to his PhD thesis, which discusses the making of Islamic orthodoxy in premodern times and which was published as *Before Orthodoxy*. The point I wish to make, however, is that he shows no reason to hold modernity responsible for shaping and establishing the hegemony of Islamic orthodoxy when he bears testimony in *Before Orthodoxy* that the hadith and fiqh “orthodoxizers” were excellent at doing the job for themselves long before the advent of modernity.

In *Before Orthodoxy*, Ahmed needed to cast the hadith society as an overruling universal force in order to market his claim that the proponents of hadith, as part of their “orthodoxizing” project, invented the idea of an “infallible and impeccable” Prophet and sold it to the Muslims worldwide.⁷ In *What Is Islam?* Ahmed tells us that the influence of the hadith and fiqh discourses was limited throughout the Muslim societies and even marginal in the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex,” where the “Sufi-philosophical amalgam” dominated until recently. Here Ahmed turns around and cuts the influence of hadith and fiqh in order to justify his introduction of some peculiar discourses at the center of the conceptualization of Islam. Let us look at his evidence.

First, Ahmed should be commended for drawing from sources in several languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Urdu, and others. Whereas he ignores the vast precolonial literature in African languages written in the Arabic script to which Ousmane Oumar Kane calls attention,⁸ Ahmed’s sources are diverse. This has enabled him to produce very rich analysis. Unfortunately, the same extensive sources and his creative engagement with them seem to have given him too much confidence and tempted him to make exaggerations. As part of his evidence, Ahmed says that Avicen-

na's conceptualization of God was so widely taught in madrassas that "in the discourse of *madrassah* theology, God is conceptually posited as and routinely referred to as "The Necessary Existent" (18–19). This kind of education established the "canonical discourses" of such men as "Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, Rumi, Ibn 'Arabi, Tusi, Hafiz," and others as "the *paideia* and, thus, the larger modes of thinking and the communicative idiom of Muslims of this space and age" (80).

Nevertheless, the fact that the ideas of the philosophers and other truth explorers featured in the madrasa curriculum and circulated among the educated class cannot be taken as conclusive evidence that such ideas significantly shaped the understanding of Islam in the wider Muslim societies. We know that the orthodox Muslim critics of the excesses of the philosophers did not dismiss philosophy wholesale. Al-Ghazali warned against the "evil [of] an ignorant friend of Islam who supposes that our religion must be championed by the rejection of every science ascribed to the philosophers."⁹ The champions of orthodoxy condemned and celebrated philosophy at the same time. If Ahmed has identified in madrassas the teaching of philosophical works, it cannot be taken as evidence that all the views of the philosophers, including the most condemned ones, had been embraced uncritically and that orthodoxy had been marginalized. Ahmed cites a number of prominent individuals with ideas that truly destabilize the orthodox-centered understanding of Islam, including the "patron-saint of Delhi" who molded his Islam "in terms of crooked-hattedness" (203–4). But he does little to show that the views of such individuals reflected the general understanding of Islam in society. It is not enough to state that the "patron-saint of Delhi" was an influential person without showing how his influence, especially regarding his "crooked-hattedness," permeated society.

Such exaggerations, however, will not undermine the powerful reconceptualization of Islam that Ahmed advances. Broadly, the conceptual insights of the book will enlighten whoever seeks to understand the complexity of tradition in precolonial societies of parts of Africa where Islam had no presence. The book comes at a time when some Africanists are busy trying to find precedent in precolonial Africa for the trimmed-down traditions of the colonial era. We are being educated that the traditions attributed to colonialism "were rarely without local historical precedents."¹⁰ In light of Ahmed's exploration of the premodern diversity of Islam, I do not think that we need to downgrade the cen-

trality of colonialism in shaping tradition by pointing to precolonial precedents of tradition. This is because the said precedents existed in the precolonial era alongside other many traditions that were suppressed during colonialism to pave the way for the institutionalization of a variant of tradition *as tradition*. It will be interesting to study how these precedents cohered with contrary traditions before colonial modernity.

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Notes

1. I have slightly modified Muhammad Muhsin Khan's translation of the hadith, *inna min al-bayan la sihra*. Khan, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 63.
2. Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 5, 72. Hereafter cited in the text.
3. Usman, *Beyond Fairy Tales*, 43–45.
4. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 22.
5. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, xx.
6. Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 269.
7. Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy*, 269.
8. Kane, *Non-Europhone Intellectuals*.
9. Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance*, 9. 203–4.
10. Spear, *Neotraditionalism*, 4. Also see Reid, "Past and Presentism," 136.

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