Shahab Ahmed


As an undergraduate student at the University of Tehran, I often passed my time with a close circle of pious male classmates. We gathered together to study, eat, travel, pray, watch movies, listen to music, argue politics, read poetry, and play video games. Joke-telling was a key ingredient of our relationships, at once social glue and lubricant. As jokes often go, the ones that circulated in my cohort ranged from the ethnically-insensitive to the raunchy and the politically-subversive. A good number were about Islam and the historic figures and texts that Muslims revere.

Here is one that has stuck with me. A man is asked how, precisely, sinners are thrown into hell on the Day of Judgment. His answer: “They are dragged to the gates of hell and cast in with a punch in the ass [*bā musht mīzanan dar-i kūnishūn*].” Perplexed, the questioner asks the man to justify his claim. He responds (and this is the “punch”-line): “It’s in the Qur’ān, where God Almighty says, *fa innahum yawma’idhin fī al-ʿadhāb-i mushtarikūn*” (Qur’ān 37:33. “So indeed they, on that Day, will be sharing in the punishment”). The efficacy of the joke turns on a homophonic connection that is lost in the retelling in any language other than Persian. In Arabic, *mushtarikūn* means “those who share [something] in common” (in this case, what is shared is the torment of hell). In Persian, however, *mushtarikūn* sounds like the phrase *musht dar-i kūn*, meaning “punch-in-the-ass.” Interpreted in a composite Arabic/Persian, then, the verse can be construed to say: “So indeed they, on that Day, will be in punishment [with a] punch-in-the-ass.”

What are we to make of this joke? Can it be grasped as anything other than offensive, even sacrilegious? What difference does it make for our judgment that the person who uttered the joke was raised in a clerical family and took meticulous care in his observance of ritual obligations? How can we reconcile his piety—his practiced respect for the sacred word of God and notional commitment to “modesty of the tongue”—with his irreverent insertion of vulgar speech into the divine diction? How, furthermore, do we make sense of the fact that when I first heard the joke told, everyone present laughed and not a word of censure was spoken? Could it be that the joke was, in some meaningful sense, *Islamic*?

Had this last question been posed to the late Shahab Ahmed, he would have answered unambiguously in the affirmative. In *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Ahmed argues that jokes are as deserving of the label “Islamic” as works of Qur’ānic exegesis, legal interpretation, and any other speech and
action that we habitually associate with Islam. He makes the further claim that just because an utterance seems to mix sacred with profane, fun with solemnity, and commitment with irreverence, its standing as Islamic is in no way diminished: the joke’s contradictory, paradoxical quality in fact gets to the very heart of what it means for something to be Islamic.

Ahmed’s project is about much more than rehabilitating jokes, of course. His book aims to accomplish nothing less than a complete rethinking of the multidisciplinary academic study of Islam. In about six hundred pages, he sets out to demolish every theoretical framework for conceptualizing Islam that retains influence in current scholarship, and proceeds to erect a new edifice atop their ruins. If the task sounds monumental, Ahmed’s staggering erudition and range has more than equipped him for the challenge. His versatility in tackling academic disciplines (anthropology, art history, comparative literature, history, law, philosophy, political theory, religious studies), is matched by his facility in analyzing an astonishing diversity of topics in an expansive range of primary sources (Arabic, Javanese, Malay, Ottoman, Panjabi, Pashto, Persian, Sirāʾīki, Urdu, and perhaps others that I missed). To call the book ambitious is an understatement.

*What is Islam?* revolves around a single question: How do we conceptualize Islam as a “historical and human phenomenon” (pp. 5-6) in such a way as to account for the widespread diversity and even contradiction that has characterized Islamic thought and practice for hundreds of years? What kind of analytic framework will help us grasp the totality of Islam such that it can accommodate various constitutive tensions—certainty and paradox, prescription and exploration, sharīʿa-mindedness and antinomianism, seriousness and playfulness? For Ahmed, the path does not lie with any of the frameworks constructed by his predecessors, which, he argues, have either been so restrictive as to exclude significant aspects of Islam, or so expansive as to be analytically useless. He also criticizes any conceptualization that relies on dichotomies like religion/culture, religious/secular, sacred/profane, or Islamic/Islamicate. The full range of phenomena that scholars have previously classified according to one or another of these binaries can be grasped, Ahmed proffers, under a single, capacious, “coherently contradictory” concept of “Islam” (pp. 301-302).

Just what, then, is this concept? A little over three hundred pages into the book, Ahmed reveals that “human and historical” Islam should be understood as “hermeneutical engagement with Revelation in all its dimensions and loci—that is, the hermeneutical engagement with the Revelatory Phenomenon comprising both Revelatory Premise and Revelatory Product” (p. 356). By this, he means a number of things. First, Islam is fundamentally a process of “meaning-making,” by which Muslims semiotically construct themselves, order the world