II

RAPPAPORT LECTURE AND ASSOCIATED COMMENTARIES

Rappaport Lecture

Drinking Secularism: A Critique of Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam?*

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ABSTRACT: In this 2023 Roy Rappaport lecture, I take up Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam*? as a point of entry to inquire into larger themes and questions—salient, hidden, to-be-pursued—in the study of religion and Islam. While Ahmed's book has been hailed as "a new way of looking at Islam," I demonstrate how his definitional enterprise is unoriginal because the problématique of Islamic orthodoxy it is tied to belongs to the long-standing Orientalist objectification of Islam. The first section summarizes Ahmed's thesis. Taking the question of alcohol and Islam—one among six questions his book is organized around—as paradigmatic of his larger thesis, I argue that this question is markedly Christian and one already broached. Here I show how Ahmed disregards rich, diverse debate on alcohol to sustain his question as an "outright contradiction" between Islam as *sharīʿa* or principle and Islam as historical phenomena. In the third section, I comparatively outline an interim "pre-text," a term central to his definition of Islam, of Ahmed's own text. In the conclusion, I iterate why my critique of Ahmed is foundational. I end by suggesting how anthropological-sociological study of Islam can become richer when analyzed not in terms of *being Islamic*, as Ahmed adjectively does, but in terms of *becoming Muslim*, as a verb.

KEYWORDS: Alcohol/wine, Christianity, colonialism, Ghālib, India/subcontinent, Orientalism, orthodoxy, Rushdie, Sufism, Turkey

I first visited Bombay (now Mumbai) after I had earned a master's degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. A friend who studied at the University of Bombay was my host. I stayed in a university hostel, located on the cusp of the Queen's Necklace[1] and Church Gate. Since the hostel did not permit guests to stay, the friend 'managed' my stay for just a few nights there. For the rest of my trip, I stayed with co-villagers of my friend in an un-posh, 'Muslim' area. The room I stayed in had seven residents, most in desperate search for a job. One resident was quite upset about the practice of drinking in Bombay, a city whose pace attracted both his admiration and his bemusement.

One day, my friend took me to the university's Kalina campus. He also wanted to show me modern, fun Bombay: pubs. As the sun was about to set, we left the campus for a pub. Seeing

my lack of affinity with the order he had placed, he attempted a note of persuasion: there was nothing wrong in just tasting it. As the beer arrived, he cast a cryptic smile at me, the teetotaler. The first sip was hard to swallow. Soon I almost threw up, saying in disgust that it tasted like goat or cow urine, animals I knew growing up in an electricity-less, 'backward' village of Bihar.

Though also a villager, my friend had lived in towns longer than I had. As an aspiring film director, he had been reading and archiving film magazines for some time. To practice his dream, he had moved to Bombay from Delhi, where we both studied for bachelor's degrees at Jamia Millia Islamia. He viewed his life in Bombay as one of fun and venture, in contrast to that available in 'unmodern' Delhi. He worked hard to meet the Bollywood figures—emerging, small, big. He joined a group of directors, actors, screenplay writers, cameramen, film journalists, and so on, most of them struggling for a 'break.' A decade or so later, while some of them became famous, my friend's destiny was failure. And while claimants to success are many, failure is often solitary. But I am getting ahead of the story!

Socializing with the Bollywood group was part of my friend's new routine in Bombay. There, during discussions, for example about Alfred Hitchcock or Akira Kurosawa, drinking was a near norm. Critical of mainstream Bollywood for selling illusion, my friend wished to join a parallel cinema to enact social change. Against conventions in Bollywood and society alike, he began to see religion as like a convention, even an illusion, his break from which also manifested in drinking beer. As we left the pub, unlike the friend who felt wonderful, I felt mostly awful for having violated the values my parents and the madrasa I studied at had imparted.

Compare this vignette (Bloom-Christen and Grunow 2022) with the one in Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2016: 3).[2] Ahmed opens his book with a dinner party at Princeton University. There, a visiting Cambridge professor asks a cohort drinking wine if he considers himself a Muslim. He tells the professor that his family has been Muslim for "a thousand years during which time we have *always* been drinking wine" (italics in original). Ahmed's narration does not examine the certitude in that Muslim's family's drinking practice for a millennium. Notably, also, while Ahmed gives details about the Cambridge Professor as a logician, European, and philosopher, the details of the life of the Muslim being questioned deserve no mention, for Ahmed wants readers to see drinking solely in relation to religion.

In *What is Islam?*, drinking wine is paradigmatic of the book's claim of a "new perspective" (83) and an "alternative" language for a "more capacious" (485) "re-conceptualization" (430) of Islam, which Ahmed defines as "*meaning-making for the self in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muḥammad as Pre-Text, Text and Con-Text*" (405; italics in original).[3] This alternative, so goes the claim, accounts for Islam as "a historical and human phenomenon" marked not only by diversity, but "by the prodigious presence of outright contradiction" (542). "Prohibited by . . . Islamic law" (57) but praised by philosophers, poets, and kings, wine-drinking is one such contradiction (71–72). The gold coin of Mughal king Jahangir (d. 1627), with a wine cup in one hand and a book (which one?) in another, figures on Ahmed's book cover. Likewise, the photo of a wine-jug inscribed with "*Allāhu Akbar* (God is Most Great)"[4] appears in the text (69). This is one among six contradictions around which Ahmed arranges his book. To situate my argument, enunciated in critical dialogue with Ahmed, a gist of his exposition (to Ahmed himself, this was "impossible"; Aga Khan Program 2016) is in order. Unlike Ahmed's convoluted prose, I recap his questions with brevity.

1. What is Islamic about Islamic philosophy? (10)
2. Is the assertion at the moment of "experiential one-ness with the Real-Truth" by Sufis, "friends of God," that they are not required to adhere to "the specific forms and strictures of Islamic law . . . , *al-sharīʿa*, an Islamic . . . truth-claim?" (19)

3. Are Shihāb al Dīn Suhrawardī's (d. 1191) philosophy of illumination and maxim of unity of existence (*waḥdatul wajūd*), discussed notably by Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), Islamic? (26)
4. Is Farsi poet Ḥāfiẓ's (d. 1390) *divān* as the most circulated text with "the ambiguous exploration of wine-drinking and (often homo-)erotic love, as well as a disparaging attitude to observant ritual piety . . . *Islamic*?" (33; italics in original)
5. Given the distinction made between religion and culture, what makes art Islamic? (46)
6. Is consuming wine Islamic? (57ff.)

Comprising 110 pages, the above form the book's Part One, "Questions." In 180 pages, Part Two, "Conceptualizations," discusses, often dismissively, the existing literature on Islam in many disciplines. Part Three, "Re-Conceptualizations," offers Ahmed's own exposition in 245 pages. The book spans 626 pages (see note 3).

Ahmed's book has been hailed as "field-changing," "the boldest" (Noah Feldman), "nothing short of a new way of looking at Islam" (Qasim Zaman), and "strikingly original" (Engseng Ho; all quotations from the book's back cover). In an accolade in the *Harvard Theological Review* by Michael Pregill (2017: 149, 165), it is a "weighty tome of monumental significance" and a soon-to-become "classic." In a rush to wish it to become a classic, Pregill feels no need to tell readers what constitutes a classic in the first place (Calvino 2000) and how canonization of texts is simultaneously a work of de-canonization and dependent on power: academic and extra-academic (Ahmad 2023b; Connell 1997). I find these judgments about *What is Islam?* puzzling and unpersuasive. Taking Ahmed's exposition on alcohol as paradigmatic (see below) of his claim to conceptualize Islam anew, I instead argue that his thesis is less than sophisticated, even pedestrian, and one emanating from the corpus of dominant Orientalism (Ahmad 2021b; Hallaq 2018; Said 2003). And it is shot through with confusions and inconsistencies—conceptual and methodological. My critique of Ahmed ipso facto is a critique of works influenced by him such as Arab's (2022), Saidalavi's (2021), and others. For instance, by showing the impoverished framing by Ahmed of his sixth question and his even poorer response thereto, the sheer poverty of the imitative question asked by Arab (2022)—"Can Muslims drink?"—is met with the same critical appraisal as Ahmed.

Organizing my text into three sections, I summarize Ahmed's thesis in the first section. Here, I identify its conceptual sources. This approach paves the way for my critique undertaken in the next section. Discussing the issue of alcohol and Islam, here I subject it to a detailed critique. My contention is that Ahmed's question about wine is neither original nor pivotal to Muslims themselves. Rather, it is an old question broached by anthropologists like Michael Gilsenan and the Christian priest-Orientalist Cyprian Rice, both of whom are absent from Ahmed's text. Absent too are Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), an arch Orientalist of Jewish background from Hungary (Lewis 1981), and Muhammad Mujeeb (d. 1985), an Indian "progressive" historian "associated with" the Congress party (Mujeeb 2003: book jacket). Trained in Germany, the question of "orthodoxy" constituted the core of scholarship of both Goldziher and Mujeeb the way it also largely does for Ahmed (see below). In fact, Ahmed's question about wine is highly Christian, later inscribed in the language of secularism and Christianity. Notably, he effaces diverse Islamic reasoning against alcohol. His six questions axiomatically rest on the polarizing dyad of *ḥarām–ḥalāl*, Islamic–un-Islamic, rather than alternatively viewing them as a spectrum on which deeds, as Talal Asad (1993: 212; 2003; 2020: 425) writes, are graded in a complex way as required (*vājib*), recommended (*mustaḥabb*), indifferent (*mubāḥ*), discouraged (*makrūh*), and forbidden (*ḥarām*). Furthermore, Ahmed's preoccupation with the adjective "Islamic"—splashed in the book's subtitle—prevents him from seeing actions in productive ways as gerunds: that is, as *becoming* Muslim, not *being* Muslim. In the continuous striving to become Muslim, *ḥarām–*

ḥalāl as a moral compass works as a spectrum, not as the reductive dualism characteristic of Ahmed's formulation and prose. In methodological terms, Ahmed also analytically abducts Ġhālib (d. 1869)—a noted Farsi-Urdu poet—to validate his claim to redefine Islam "anew" in the catalogue of wine-drinking. I demonstrate how his reading of poetic sources is arbitrary. So is the reading of Sā'di Shirazi's *gulistāñ* as favoring homoeroticism. Ahmed has very little to say about the subjectivity of Muslims—for instance, those in China—who translated it to instead depict heteroerotic love (Jabbari and Tsai 2020: 9). In the third section, I outline the pre-text of Ahmad's own text, especially about Islam–alcohol and orthodoxy, both in relation to the concepts of habitus (see note 9) and participant objectivation (Bourdieu 2003). In the conclusion I recap my critique of Ahmed. Unlike specific criticisms by Pregill (2017: 164), who detects "the neglect of gender as a factor," or by Andani (2017: 116), who complains that Ahmed "ignores Shi'i traditions,"[5] I emphasize that my critique is foundational in that it confronts the core of Ahmed's thesis. Here, I also show how Ahmed's claim to offer a "new perspective" falls flat as it remains loyal to "keywords" (Williams 1983), such as Muslim "conquest," "Indic," and "the Middle East," of the old but still dominant framework. I end by stressing the need to focus on *becoming* Muslim, not *being* Muslim, as a fruitful arena of future research and thinking.

Since the notion of paradigm as an approach is key to my argument, let me clarify its usage. It differs from the standard use as a framework or model, which Ahmed also deploys (e.g., 75, 79, 82ff.). He uses paradigm and perspective identically (83), including in Thomas Kuhn's sense of a "paradigm shift" (238). Situated in the Aristotelian tradition and recently also discussed by Giorgio Agamben (2009),[6] I take paradigm as a method to study the specific in order to arrive at the general. In Greek, paradigm means to show 'beside itself.' By showing as an example, paradigm as a form of knowledge, then, neutralizes its own specificity to beckon to the general. Thus, I take Ahmed's analysis of wine-drinking as paradigmatic of his thesis in general. That is, if my critique is valid about the specific subject of Islam and alcohol, it will logically extend to the generality of Ahmed's thesis from which the former ensues. The word pre-text, central to Ahmed's definition of Islam cited earlier, is also key, I assert, to appreciating *What is Islam?* So is "paratext," a concept literary theorist Gérard Genette (1991) uses to mark the import of materials external but vital to understand a text. While the material prior to a text's publication is peritext, the one subsequent to it is epitext.

Situating Shahab Ahmed's Exposition

In *What is Islam?*, Ahmed does not sufficiently explain why he is at pains to define Islam. Who, after all, is seeking the definition and for which purposes? And if to define is "based on a sovereign 'decision'" (Abeysekara 2011: 258), what are its source, force, and course? On occasions, he gives the reason for his definitional mission: it points to the question of "Islamic orthodoxy" (e.g., 129n38, 280). He therefore refers readers to his forthcoming book: "The Problem of the Satanic Verses and the Formation of Islamic Orthodoxy." This is Ahmed's PhD dissertation submitted to Princeton University and posthumously published as *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Ahmed 2017). In fact, *What is Islam*? is not a book in its own right, it is an attachment to an expanded inquiry into his PhD project about what he calls Islamic orthodoxy (Muhanna 2015). Since *What is Islam*? is primarily an adjunct to *Before Orthodoxy*, to evaluate the former is to begin with the latter, which is the first of a three-volume project; the author tragically died before writing other volumes (publisher's note in Ahmed 2017: 3). Below I cite Ahmed at length to understand his aim and argument:

> This book was conceived as . . . [a] history of Muslim attitudes to the Satanic verses incident . . . the name given in Western scholarship to what is known in the Islamic tradition as *qiṣṣat algharānīq*, "The Story of the Cranes" . . . which narrates the occasion on which the Prophet Muḥammad is reported to have mistaken words suggested to him by Satan as being Divine Communication—that is, as being part of the Qur'ān. These Satanic verses praise the pagan deities . . . By uttering the Satanic verses, Muḥammad thus committed the error of compromising the fundamental . . . principle of the Divine Message . . . unicity (*tawḥīd*) . . .
>
> The universal rejection of the Satanic verses incident constitutes an instance of contemporary Islamic orthodoxy . . . *For the last two hundred years, to be a Muslim, one should believe that the Satanic verses incident did not take place* . . .
>
> The reason for my writing this book is that . . . this Islamic orthodoxy of the rejection of the facticity of the Satanic verses incident has not always obtained. [My] . . . fundamental finding . . . is that in the first two centuries of Islam, Muslim attitudes to the Satanic verses incident were . . . opposite of what they are today. (Ahmed 2017: 1–2; italics mine)

These passages show how the Satanic verses incident is emblematic of orthodoxy, which, elsewhere, Ahmed takes as "restricted and *restricting*" (115; italics original). To Ahmed (2017: 4n4), orthodoxy is "a belief that is universally held to be (really) true." Here he cites Talal Asad to say that it "is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship of power." What, however, is the sense in which Ahmed reads Asad's notion of power? He does this, so it seems, predominantly in terms of political power, whereas Asad's use is broad enough to encompass the capacity to persuade or think. After this brief mention, Asad is exiled for good. This mode of discussing an author is, to say the least, unsatisfactory. Ahmed knows well that his notion of orthodoxy is quite unlike Asad's. Of what use is it, then, to cite Asad without engaging with his whole argument—and the wider discourse it enunciates—of which the quoted line is a mere phrase? After this brief reference to Asad's essay *The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam*, he does not discuss the latter's later writings that clarify the original 1986 essay (see e.g., Ahmad 2015). Notably, the case Ahmed marshals from natural sciences to seamlessly apply to the human world is incorrect. He writes: "[an] example of a supremely successful orthodoxy is the belief, universally held today, that the earth is round . . . or . . . a geoid" (2017: 4). This troubles the differentiation Wilhelm Dilthey (d. 1911), a German philosopher, made between *Geisteswissenschaften*, human sciences, and *Naturwissenschaften*, natural sciences (Lessnoff 1994). The point, though, is not that there is no traffic between the two.

Despite the Satanic verses being central to his inquiry, neither of Ahmed's books even mentions Salman Rushdie and his novel *The Satanic Verses*,[7] let alone writings on it by Asad (1993: Ch. 7) or Mazrui (1990). From elsewhere we learn that Ahmed became interested in it as a PhD student in the early 1990s. He keenly followed the controversy sparked by Rushdie's novel, which he "defended" (Moten 2017 87, 90; Mian 2020; Muhanna 2015). This context is critical for the onset of "the new world order" in 1989, marked as year zero, linked as much to the fall of the USSR and the Berlin Wall as it is to the Rushdie storm, which prefaced a new cold war waged against "global Islamism" and "Islamist terrorism" (Falkenhayner 2010: 112, 118). I will come back to this point in my third section. Suffice here to record Ahmed's response to a remark by a friend to whom he had explained (details of which are withheld from readers) his book project about the Satanic verses. To his friend's remark, "What is this creature with which you have chosen to pick your fight?" Ahmed says: "too right, but too late" (2017: 334).

The ways in which he frames orthodoxy "from the beginning of Islam down to the present day" make it evident that for Ahmed (2017: 1) the book is academic in the sense of a "fight" he had "chosen to pick" and his own certainty about being on the right side of it; nay, "too right." This self-righteousness goes hand in hand with manifestly unsustainable claims like the one

cited above: to be a Muslim in the past two centuries, "one should believe that the Satanic verses incident did not take place." Really? Notice the absolutist nature of the claim ("one" here means all) that annexes the realm of belief itself: "*one* should *believe*." Ahmed gives no evidence to back his claim. In teaching a child or adult to become a Muslim, there is not even a mention of the Satanic verses incident, let alone the rejection of this incident that Ahmed invents as integral to Muslims' belief. For instance, I found no evidence of this claim in my ethnographic work on Islamic schooling in India (Ahmad 2009). An average Muslim indeed does not even know the Satanic verses incident. This claim by Ahmed, then, comes as a fiction aimed probably to convince readers: Though my book is about early Islamic history, it is no less relevant *now*. More to the point, what is the term that Muslims themselves use in Arabic or other languages to express what Ahmed terms "orthodoxy"? Is there even an Arabic word approximating orthodoxy in the first place? And is it a term internal to Muslims? Such issues are crucial but beyond Ahmed's 'interest!'

Early on, Ahmed (2017: 1) notes, albeit tangentially, that what Westerners name the Satanic verses, Muslim tradition calls the story of the cranes. Here a vital question arises: why does Ahmed use the Western, not Muslim, term throughout his book, including in its title (as he does in his 2004 and 1998 publications too; see note 7)? My point is not a trivial linguistic matter; rather, it is profoundly conceptual. Naming matters. Rather than merely *convey* 'reality out there,' naming also *constitutes* reality. So critical was naming to Reinhart Koselleck (2004), a pioneer of *begriffsgeschichte*, that he discussed at length the power of antithetical concepts, later developed by others as combat-concepts (see Ahmad 2021c). Thus viewed, war in politics is war in naming and language. Ahmed's choice of the Satanic verses is like deploying it as a combat-concept. In contrast to the Arabic name (the story of the cranes), the English name (the Satanic verses) is clearly loaded, for the word satanic unleashes a negative signification from the start. My argument is that the names used in Arabic and English belong to different architectures of sensibility, each redolent of a radically distinct ethos, mode of knowledge, and its relation to power. By choosing the English, not Arabic, name Ahmed partakes in an Orientalist hermeneutics, which, unlike him, I turn to now.

In one account, Sir William Muir (d. 1905), a Scottish Orientalist, Christian missionary, and a conscript to the British Empire appointed as Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Provinces of India, coined the name 'Satanic verses' and used it in his *Life of Mahomet*. This was part of Muir's scheme to discredit the Prophet Muḥammad. Against Muslims' self-view, Muir's objective was to show that teachings upheld by the Prophet Muḥammad "were subject to satanic inspiration" (Anthony 2019: 217). Montgomery Watt (d. 2006), another Scottish Orientalist after Muir, redeployed the name 'Satanic verses.' Rushdie acknowledged he had read Watt's work (ibid.: 217n6). So Islamophobic was Muir's book that even Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), founder of the Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College (later to become Aligarh Muslim University) and deemed the foremost Muslim 'modernist' of India, wrote a rejoinder to Muir (Khan 2002). To quickly remind readers, hostility to Islam and the Prophet Muḥammad prevailed before Muir and Watt too and across Europe (Ahmad 2017). To iterate, Ahmed is interested in the Satanic verses only as a signifier of the larger question about orthodoxy, which, as discussed later with reference to Goldziher, Mujeeb, and Rice, is unoriginal too.

To come back to Ahmed's definition, his inaugural phrase mentioned at the beginning of this essay, "hermeneutical engagement," is salient. I too value hermeneutics in pursuit of understanding and meaning. But as Wilhelm Dilthey (1972: 232), a theorist of hermeneutics, aptly observed: "understanding has various degrees" that are "determined first of all by interests." The preceding pages simply outlined an admittedly interim genealogy of Ahmed's 'interest,' which in Arabic means both *maṣlaḥa* and *ihtemām* and in Urdu *zavq* and *mafād*.

The phrase "hermeneutical engagement" is followed by the syntagma "with Revelation to Muḥammad as Pre-Text, Text and Con-Text." The text refers to the Qur'ān, which Ahmed also calls "scripture," and at times he uses it in conjunction with *ḥadīth* (e.g., 347). By context—nay, Con-Text—he means "the body of meaning that is the . . . outcome of previous hermeneutical engagement with Revelation" (356). Ahmed's use of Pre-Text is premised on the Qur'ānic distinction between unseen (*'ālam al-ġhayb*) and seen (*'ālam al-shahādah*) world. The Qur'ān as "the Text of the Revelation," Ahmed elaborates, rests on the axiom of "an Unseen Reality or Truth that lies beyond and behind the Text of the Revelation-in-the-Seen." That is, revelation of "Truth [is] from the Unseen-God-beyond-this-world (Allah) to a human messenger-in-this-world called Muḥammad" and the former is "*ontologically prior to and alethically* (that is, as regards truth) *larger than* the textual product of the Revelation." Pre-Text, then, is a byword for "the world of the Unseen" and the Qur'ān "does not encompass *all* the Truth of the Unseen" (346, 347; italics in original).

Taking the unseen as "higher," Ahmed writes that Muslims, however, disagree over how to access it. While for *'ulema*, *fuqha*, and jurists (353), whose reading of Islam he dubs "legal-supremacist" (120), there is no access to Truth without the Qur'ān, for others, there is. These are philosophers, Sufis, and poets who form the bases of his definition. Their discourse, Ahmed explains, "subjects the Qur'ān to the higher . . . universal primacy of Reason [= Pre-Text]," for the former is an "inferior instantiation" of "Reason" (348). Among philosophers, Ahmed gives utmost attention to Avicenna or Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), who held that, armed with "superior human intellects," one can access higher Truth without the Qur'ān, "a lesser version of that Truth" meant for ordinary souls. Ibn Sīnā, moreover, did not believe in bodily resurrection on the Judgement day, making thereby the ideas of Heaven or Hell redundant (11, 12). Ahmed takes Ibn Sīnā to index philosophy's "no-holds-barred subjection of" the Qur'ān to Reason of Pre-Text (520). Relevant to this lecture's theme, Ibn Sīnā routinely drank wine (61).

Sufis too claim access to the Truth of Pre-Text, ultimately regardless of *sharī'a*. Unlike philosophers' Reason, for Sufis it is cosmos as divine expression. Deeply personal, for Sufis, Truth "is accessible in and *via* the cosmos by *existential* knowing of the cosmos" (350; italics in original). Figures Ahmed uses to drive home his thesis are al-Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī, known respectively for the philosophy of Illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) and of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Al-Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī, "the most influential Sufi in history," converge in their maxim that flattens any gap between God, the creator, and the created. Al-Suhrawardī held that "God is (in) all things to a lesser or greater degree" (27). Ahmed highlights al-Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī due precisely to their "potential pantheism and relativism," themselves not original because they are "cross-inflections" of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy and of Sufism writ large (26).

Strictly speaking, poets do not form a distinct category. They are vital in as much as poetry—especially in Farsi, Turkish, and Urdu—is the most popular genre in which Sufism finds its expression. Here, Jalāl-ud-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273), Sa'dī Shīrāzī (d. 1292), and Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1390) figure quite prominently. Ḥāfiẓ is at the core of Ahmed's discourse because he is known as "*lisān-ul- ġhayb*, the tongue of the unseen" (34) and his *dīvān*, poetic work, is taken as "a simulacrum to" the Qur'ān (35), as is Rūmī's *mas'navī*, "the Qur'ān in the Persian tongue" (307). Indeed he takes Ḥāfiẓian discourse as constituting a "school of love (*madhab-i-'ishq*)." In it, as in Rūmī's, love is spiritual and carnal alike (38; see Ahmed's fourth question above). In Rūmī's justification for wine-drinking by Shams-i-Tabrīz, Ahmed tells us, the very line separating *ḥalāl* from *ḥarām* disappears (101). Critical here is to ask: what is Ahmed's account geared to? It aims to "destabilize" understandings of Islam based on the "supremacy of . . . sources of Revealed Truth . . . : the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, or Islamic law" (97). For Ahmed, even the five pillars, the first of which is *shahādah* (there is no god but God and Muḥammad is the

Messenger of God), are in dispute. He cites Ahmet Karamustafa, "the eminent Muslim scholar" (137), who opines that Muslims agree only on the first pillar. To this, Ahmed is quick to add that even *shahādah* is not a "stabilizing" element for it leaves the door ajar about what God or His message are. Ahmed continues his mission to "destabilize," stressing that the Shīʿī *shahādah* has an added syntagma: "I witness that ʿAlī is the Deputed One (*walī*) of God" (139). Ahmed reads this syntagma as disturbing the very meaning of the Messenger in *shahādah*. Though put differently, Ahmad's project to destabilize orthodoxy echoes Goldziher's, who cited a Sufi to say that the Qur'ān is "*shirk* [polytheism]" (see below).

Ahmed's definitional alternative is to understand Islam through the lens of what he calls a "philosophical-Sufi amalgam" (54). Far from being marginal, Ahmed claims, the value, philosophy, and practices of this amalgam defined Islam in the vast region from the Balkans to Bengal from 1350 to 1850 (73). Compared to "primitive" Islam, he pronounces, Islam is "mature" in the Balkans-to-Bengal Complex, the foundational language of which was Farsi, not Arabic (525). Ahmed wants readers to take this formulation as descriptive, while he terms Asad's "*prescriptive*" (272; italics in original). Predicated throughout on a dualism between Arab Islam as "proscriptive" and non-Arab Islam as "explorative" (519), Ahmed's unrestrained admiration is for Islam as "described" by him in the Balkans-to-Bengal Complex. That many scholars—for instance, Moḥsin ʿUsmānī Nadvī (2010: 157)—interpreted the contributions to Islam in Persian not as a rival to but as a "continuation (*tasalsul*)" of those in Arabic merits no attention from Ahmed. Nor does Ahmed account for the propriety of the terms Sufi or Sufism, which he freely uses. For instance, ʿAbul Ḥasan ʿAlī Nadvī (1913–1999), a leading Indian scholar of Islam in the twentieth century and popularly known as ʿAlī Mīāñ, suggested *eḥsān* or *fiqh-e-bāṭin* as terms more appropriate than the prevalent Sufism or *taṣavvuf* (Nadvī 2010: 96–98).

"Half a Muslim" and the Question of Wine

Equipped with a summary of Ahmed's exposition in its generality, let us proceed to examine his question about wine in its specificity. This section shows how his question is unoriginal—indeed, largely a secular or Christian one. Astonishingly, he treats reasons against alcohol only passingly. As I show below, he disregards rich, diverse debate on alcohol in a long history of Islamic scholarship. This disregard is a necessity to sustain his question (and the wider discourse it rests on) as an "outright contradiction." Furthermore, Ahmed does not have a methodology for how to read rich multilingual archival sources, which he himself has so laboriously and spectacularly compiled.

To prove his definitional enterprise, Ahmed contrasts "prohibition" of wine in legal discourses with its "*positive* valorization" (62; italics in original) in a "non-legal" (66) philosophical-Sufi amalgam. He states: grape wine is "prohibited by all schools of Islamic law, which forbid the consumption of intoxicating liquids on the basis of the verse of the Qur'ān . . . (al-Mā'idah, 5: 92 [*sic*])" (57). He also cites a *ḥadīth*, which forbids even smaller amounts of intoxicants. In parentheses, he notes that though the Ḥanafī school allowed some spirits from non-grape sources, by the thirteenth century it had joined other schools to favor "blanket prohibition." This observation is misleading. A full analysis would not merely state the mere fact of prohibition but also account for its rationale, including what constitutes alcohol or wine, its types, drinks that are forbidden, and why. By removing the rationale from the prohibition, Ahmed does not do justice to his own analysis and nor does he build a relationship of transparency with his readers.

The prohibition on alcohol for which the Qur'ān uses *ḵhamr* (more below) stems not only from the verse from al-Mā'ida, as Ahmed maintains, but also from other verses, which together

form a comprehensive discourse (Buṭāmī n.d.: 30–34; Maududi 1977: 13–15; Quraishī 1978: 23–25). Initially, drinks made from date-palms and vines were not forbidden (Buṭāmī n.d.: 30). The Qur'ān (an-Naḥl: 67) refers to them as "wholesome drink and food" (Yusuf Ali's translation).[8] In al-Baqara (219), it says: "In both [intoxicants and games of chance] there is great evil as well as some benefit for man; but the evil which they cause is greater than the benefit which they bring" (Muhammad Asad's translation). Evidently, the Qur'ānic take is not unidirectional (see also Maududi 1976: 95–96, 99n72; 1977). And in an-Nisā' (43), God says: "draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which ye utter" (Piktal's translation). Ahmed's sole citation of al-Mā'ida erases the wholeness of the Qur'ānic discourse. Even the reference to al-Mā'ida (where the right verse, however, is 90, not 92) is partial as he does not state reasons the Qur'ān subsequently offers: "By means of intoxicants and games of chance Satan seeks only to sow enmity and hatred among you, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer. Will you not, then, desist?" (Mohammad Asad's translation). Discussing this verse, 'Atāullah Pālvī (1992: 251) described the Qur'ānic mode of discoursing as "loving and reasoned," because it elucidates what is beneficial individually as well as collectively. For English readers, Ahmed also does not translate the verse's opening syntagma, which he does cite in Arabic: *yā ayyuhā alladhīnā āmanū*. It identifies the Qur'ān's addressee. Unlike its usual rendition as "O believers," Mohammad Asad glosses it as "O YOU who have attained to faith!" This is telling because unlike Ahmed's constricting adjective (Islamic), Asad marks faith as a verb, an ongoing labor of attaining it.

Clearly, the term "blanket prohibition" that Ahmed uses is not directly from the Qur'ān, which uses *fa-ijtanibū-hū*: "abstain from or shun it." Relatedly, of four things it labels *ḥarām*, wine is not among them (Pālvī 1992: 250). Though the prohibition is grounded foremost in the Qur'ān and ḥadīth, its categorization as *ḥarām* is by jurists. Before examining Ahmed's claim of blanket prohibition by all schools, it is relevant to know the very object that is prohibited.

Linguistically, *ḳhamr* means 'to conceal.' That is, it conceals *'aql*, power to reason, of the intoxicated (Buṭāmī n.d.: 28; Ibn Rushd 2000: 572; Quraishī 1978: 21). Regardless of its quantity, jurists agree that *ḳhamr* made from grapes is prohibited. But they do not quite agree on the status of drinks made from other sources. In scholarly writings, Hejaz and Iraq symbolize this difference: the former as representing "general prohibition" and the latter as "narrow prohibition" (Sheikh and Islam 2018: 209n3). The most known figure of the narrow prohibition is Imam Abu Ḥanīfa (d. 767), founder of the Ḥanafī school. To philosopher Ibn Rushd (2000: 571) or Averroes (d. 1198), Hejaz denotes the convergent position of the Shāfi'ī, Malikī, and Ḥanbalī jurists. For Abu Ḥanīfa, "what is prohibited in all the remaining beverages (that is, besides wine derived from grape juice) is intoxication itself and not the substance (of the beverages)" (Ibn Rushd 2000: 571). Thus, non-grape wine can be consumed as long as one does not reach a state of drunkenness. Partisans of narrow prohibition differentiate *ḳhamr* from other types of alcoholic beverages, broadly called *nabīdh*. Its two subtypes are *mizr*, made from barley, and *bita'*, made from honey. Additionally, they hold that some companions of the Prophet also drank these beverages. Abū Jafar al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933) therefore maintains that while "we are sure of its [*ḳhamr*'s] prohibition in the Qur'ān . . . we cannot say the same of other beverages" (in Sheikh and Islam 2018: 192). In contrast, and taking a maximalist view, non-Ḥanafī jurists, to quote Ibn Rushd (2000: 572), argue that "all (intoxicating) beverages are called *ḳhamr*." They also resort to lexical argument: since *ḳhamr* clouds one's intellect, it applies to any beverage that dulls one's power to reason and act. The Shī'ī position is similar (Sheikh and Islam 2018: 187).

Contra Ahmed's contention that after the thirteenth century the Ḥanafī school changed, Sheikh and Islam (2018: 208) instead show that its unique position against the prohibition of non-*ḳhamr* alcoholic beverages as *mubāḥ* continues until today. Ahmed's assumption of an

iron wall separating the Ḥanafī from other schools is also wrong. Nur Muhammad al-Awari (d. 1834), a Shāfiʿī jurist in Dagestan, upheld Abu Ḥanīfa's position: "If a person sees someone drink *nabīdh*, then it is not possible to condemn him, since perhaps he is following the view of Abu Hanifah." So did Muhammad al-Quduqi (d. 1717), also a Shāfiʿī *qādī*: "It is preferable not to consume drinks about which there is no unified scholarly opinion. It is also preferable not to condemn . . . those who use them in non-intoxicating quantities" (in Musaev 2017: 19). *Pace* Ahmed, what we see is not Ḥanafī become Shāfiʿī; it is the opposite.

Unlike Ahmed, I hope to have given a full and diverse portrait, which unsettles Ahmed's premise of a sharp line between legal and non-legal discourse on one hand and Ḥanafī and non-Ḥanafī on the other. That is, the ambiguity about wine that he exaggeratedly and often wrongly valorizes in poetry of the so-called philosophical-Sufi amalgam obtains, albeit differently, in legal discourses too. Moreover, the position of the Ḥanafī school from the time of Abu Ḥanīfa until now, also shared by some Shāfiʿī jurists as I documented, questions the temporal-spatial assumptions of Ahmed's neologism of the Balkans-to-Bengal Complex.

So fixated is Ahmed with his definition of Islam as total contradiction that he sees none in his own analysis. We know Ahmed's love for wine and for Jahangir (see the Conclusion). Historians of the Mughal dynasty have written about alcohol as a "scourge" in the royal family. Jahangir's uncle and two of his brothers had died due to addiction. And he forced his son, Shah Jahan, then aged 24, to take to alcohol. In pursuit of virtue signed by Islam, Shah Jahan later quit drinking. In his memoir, Jahangir records his own struggle with alcoholism. While himself a drinker, he banned alcohol and other intoxicants (Balabanlilar 2020: 48, 76; Fisher 151, 167). Is it not contradictory for Jahangir to issue a gold coin depicting himself holding a wine cup while his decree banned alcohol? Who decides what forms a contradiction? And which one is to be elevated to an academic question? Notably, is it Reason at work when Jahangir, a fan of Ḥāfiẓ and whom Ahmed crowns as an icon of the Reason of the "philosophical-Sufi amalgam" and a rival of the *sharīʿa* of the "jealous jurist" (110), forces his son to drink alcohol? That the desire for wine is not 'natural' and is a matter of habitus,[9] in the case of Shah Jahan a blatantly forced one, evades Ahmed's frame. So do consequences of alcoholism.

It is important to note that the position of general prohibition by scholars and jurists crucially relates to the results of alcoholism. To them, the verse in al-Mā'ida that takes wine (and gambling) as a source of social discord and distraction from Allah is an interpretative axis. In 1934, soon after the US repealed the prohibition against alcohol (in force from 1920 to 1933; see Hall 2010; Holt 2022; Rorabaugh 1991), Abul ʿAla Maududi (d. 1979), a prominent political thinker and founder of Jamāʿt-e-Islamī in the Indian subcontinent, lamented the revocation. In so doing, he described how wine was "the closest kin" of many a problem such as gambling, crime, murder, and prostitution (1977: 5). Recent empirical research shows how alcohol use and intimate partner violence (IPV), for instance, are connected in the US. Klostermann and Fals-Stewart (2006: 594) report that alcohol is a "contributing factor in the occurrence of IPV." Studies also demonstrate connections between "higher rates of alcohol use and violence in athlete populations" (Sønderlund et al. 2014: 2). In India, the correlation between drinking among men and dropout among school children is striking (Saxena 1997). Had Ahmed also addressed the effects of alcohol, he might have asked: Why does Sikhism prohibit both alcohol and tobacco (Sandhu 2009)? And why do born-again Christians in the Pentecostal movement in Africa and elsewhere stand for abstention from alcohol, a "demon" (Van Dijk 2002; Nelson 2014)?

Before Pentecostalism, consumption of wine among Christians was mostly esteemed, though the biblical discourse on it is far from univocal. While some passages see it positively, others do neutrally. In yet other passages, it is "indisputably negative" (Phillips 2014: 46). Historically, wine has been at the heart of Christianity such that it made Christ like "a new wine god" (ibid.:

50). Along with the miracle by Jesus when he turned water into wine (Holt 2022), the signification bestowed on wine originates from the doctrine of transubstantiation according to which "at the Eucharist the substance of the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ." At the Last Supper before his crucifixion, Jesus held a wine cup and then offered it to his disciples, saying: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (in ibid.: 234). Given the ritual of the Eucharist, drinking consecrated wine as Jesus's blood is in fact taken as a sign of divine grace, facilitating entry into the kingdom of heaven. In medieval Europe, the church, in league with aristocrats, owned viniculture. Though the Protestant Reformation questioned links between wine and faith (Holt 2022), the import of wine in Christianity, as also in wider 'secular' culture, persists. Wine, then, is not an object; rather, writes Michel Serres, "the object becomes subject, the wine becomes blood, personality becomes unanimity and death immortality" (cited in Anidjar 2014: xiii, 144–145). Gil Anidjar, one of the finest critical theorists of our time, indeed marks deep connections among economic theology in Christianity, blood, race, and wine as follows: economics "figures Christ's blood before spirit, blood in lieu of spirit (or wine), as the basis of economic theology."

Owing precisely to wine's centrality in Christian and secular culture, Westerners—'religious,' 'secular,' and myriad shades of it in between—find it of 'interest' when they see Muslims drink wine. Such 'facts' amaze them, for what is theologically-ritually distinct to Christianity is present differently among Muslims too. Conversely, prohibitions against lying, murder, or theft shared between Christianity and Islam become 'uninteresting.' Long before Ahmed, anthropologist Michael Gilsenan (1982: 9–10) wrote about Muslims drinking whisky. He began his book, as Ahmed does over three decades later, with a vignette about Muslims consuming alcohol. While Gilsenan's vignette is about Muslims sartorially wearing their "holiness" in Hadramout, Yemen, Ahmed's is about Princeton. In both, the emotion invoked is similar: while the Cambridge professor in Ahmed's prose felt "bewildered," for Gilsenan the "shock was enormous." One response to shock is to annihilate that which differentiates its subject from its object. That is, to assimilate the other through 'inclusion.' Stephanie Honchell (2015: 9), a historian of the Islamic world, thus makes the case for not excluding Muslims from "global histories" about alcohol, for such a view rehashes views about Muslims as "a sober 'other,' fundamentally different from their western Christian counterparts." Seldom are calls for inclusion innocent, though.

Cyprian Rice typifies evangelical interest in wine, Sufism, poetry, and much else. Born in 1889 to a Baptist family, he converted to Catholicism at Cambridge where, as an employee of the Levant consular service, he studied Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. During World War I, he worked for the consular service in the Middle East. In 1925, he was ordained in the Dominican Order. In 1929, Rice began working with the apostolic delegate in Tehran. Later, in Shiraz, he and his fellow OPs (order of preachers) started conducting the Mass in Farsi. After World War II, Rice worked for the Order in Cairo and at Dominican University, Rome. He died in 1966, two years after the publication of his book *The Persian Sufis*, described as a "major work" (Dominican Friars 2013).

Rice's book aimed "to contribute to a better understanding of the inner life of the vast Mahometan [*sic*] populations of Asia and Africa." To fulfill Pope John XXIII's wish, shared with Benedictine abbots in Rome, he focused not on what divided minds but on what brought them together. Rice wrote: "In this study, I have . . . used the language of Christian mysticism." To this missionary end, Rice attacked "Islamic orthodoxy" and cast Sufism as an alternative because there was "a kinship between the Sufi spirit and vocabulary and those of the Christian saints." The Sufi ideas were not autonomous, however; they were mere influences of Christianity, particularly of Eastern monasticism. For Rice, Iran and Farsi were antitheses of Arabs, Arabic, and orthodox Islam. In Rice's view, Sufism is not a template within Islam; instead, it is "Persia's

revenge for the imposition of Islam and of the Arabic Qoran [*sic*]." Unsurprisingly, Rice elevated Sufi poetry to the status of the Qur'ān (Rice 1964: 17, 16, 36, 21, 10, 22, 11). In Rice's reading, Islam and spirituality are like chalk and cheese and Sufism is a religion unto itself—one where belief in Muḥammad's prophethood does not figure:

> This religion [Sufism] was disseminated mainly by poetry, it breathed in an atmosphere of poetry and song. In it the place of great dogmatic treatises is taken by mystical romances, such as Yusuf and Zuleikha or Leila and Majnun. Its one dogma, an interpretation of the Moslem witness. 'There is no god but God', is that the human heart must turn always, unreservedly, to the one, divine Beloved. (ibid.: 9)

In the chapter on *fanā*, Rice cited Ḥāfiẓ's composition beginning with: *sālhā dil ṭalab-ē jām-e Jam az mā mīkard* ("for years our heart has been seeking Jamshid's glass from us"; as Rice gives no reference, see Ḥāfiẓ n.d.: 170). To this, Rice (1964: 73–74) adds his own "notes":

> The "Magian priest" (*pīr-e-muġhāñ*), in such passages [in the third couplet], stands either for a Magian or a Christian priest, or even for a tavernkeeper, whose chief recommendation, for the Sufi, lay in the fact that, outside or in contravention of the Moslem law, such as he freely drank and dispensed wine . . . . Wine, for the Sufi, stood for the joys of divine ecstasy and self-forgetfulness, proscribed by the narrow-minded Moslem moralists and theologians.

Notice that Rice's notes make the Magian priest Christian, who in turn becomes a pub manager. Next, he links Sufis to the tavernkeeper, who then advises Sufis, who, breaching "the Moslem law," "freely drink . . . wine." Rice concludes by portraying "Moslem moralists and theologians" as "narrow-minded" and Sufis as flagbearers "of the joys of divine ecstasy." Is Rice's formulation not similar to Ahmed's, who decries the "legal-supremacist" understanding of Islam by "jealous" jurists and *'ulema* and praises "the more capacious and flexible" Islam of the so-called "philosophical-Sufi amalgam?" Remarkably, 'the other' in the analytical edifice of both Rice and Ahmed is the same: Mahometan Orthodoxy for Rice; Islamic Orthodoxy for Ahmed. With some caution, it is plausible to say that half a century before him, Rice already presented the essence of Ahmed's definitional formulation. Most keywords at the core of Ahmed's book appear in Rice's: Yusuf and Zuleiḳha; Leila and Majnuñ; Farhād va Shīrīñ; Farsi poetry; Islamic orthodoxy; inflexible Arab, capacious Persian; dogmatic *'ulema*, open-minded Sufis; and so on. Likewise figures central in Rice's book are also pivotal in Ahmed's: Al-Suhrawardī, Ibn Sīnā, Ḥāfiẓ, Rūmī, and Sā'dī Shirazi.

To conclude this section, I show how Ahmed's analysis of poetry lacks a methodology. He selectively picks a couplet to interpret it such that it furthers his goal. Consider Ahmed enlisting Ġhālib's poetry to bolster his case for a "philosophical-Sufi amalgam." Ahmed describes the nineteenth-century poet of Delhi, Ġhālib, as "Ḥāfiẓ of Urdu" (236). He quotes a couplet by Ġhālib as follows: "These, the conundra of Sufism; and these—O! Ġhālib—your solutions for them / We would have acknowledged you a saint [*valī*]—were it not for your wine-drinking!" Interpreting it, Ahmed writes that there is no contradiction between Ġhālib's insight into Sufi puzzles and him being "a notorious wine-drinker" (99–100). However, rather than stay focused on Ġhālib's work there, he rushes to Rūmī, who justified wine-drinking by Shams Tabrīz. From Ġhālib's own work, the evidence, however, is contrary to what Ahmed makes Ġhālib to be. Here, Ahmed simply rehashes the pet trope, which reads Ġhālib as a *rind*. In Farsi and Urdu, *rind* means 'wine-drinker.' But it also means 'unbridled,' one whose outward action is flawed but whose inner self, *bāṭin*, is free from cultivated malice (*Firozulloġhāṭ* 2014: 761; Ahmad 2017: 78–79). In talking about his addiction, Ġhālib also admits of his own frailty rather than celebrating it. In a couplet no less meaningful than the one Ahmed cites, Ġhālib says with much pathos:

"With what face, Ġhālib, will you go to the *kʿāba*? You don't have a sense of shame." My point is this: beyond the fact of Ahmed being choosy about a couplet, more important is to emphasize that he does not have a methodology to interpret Ġhālib's couplets like the one I cited. That is, what is the methodology to read not this or that couplet by a poet but her entire corpus, which in Ġhālib's case traverses languages (Farsi and Urdu) and genres (verse and prose)? Ġhālib in prose does indeed undo Ahmed's reading of him, for Ġhālib categorically speaks of a line separating *ḥarām* from *ḥalāl*. In the terrible aftermath of the 1857 rebellion against the British, Ġhālib was called to appear before one Colonel Brown who asked: "Are you a Muslim?" Ġhālib replied: "Half a Muslim." He clarified to the Colonel: "I drink alcohol but don't eat pork." Elsewhere he wrote: "I reject hypocrites and unbelievers [plural of *zindīq*], consider wine ḥarām and regard myself a sinner" (in ʿAlīg 2007: 18).

Ahmed's treatment of homoeroticism in Sāʿdī's prosimetrum *gulistāñ* is equally misleading. It is one thing to say, as he does, that *gulistāñ* was "known . . . to every literate from the Balkans-to-Bengal over half-a-millennium" (493), quite another to non-evidentially assume that in its *entirety* and *identically* it was known to everyone. Readers choose to read what they deem proper in a text or remember that which they find valuable. As Ahmed has no data about how readers took *gulistāñ*, he is driven to magnify homoeroticism from the perspective of the author alone. As one who has studied Farsi from primary education in a madrasa until my bachelor's in a university, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, I recall neither my teachers nor the curriculum ever mentioning it.[10] In fact, the crucial point about readers' agency in terms of reception, translation, and selection of a text flies past Ahmed.

Consider Chinese translations of *gulistāñ*, published respectively in 1947 and 2012 by Wang Jingzhai (1897–1949) and Yang Wanbao (b. 1964), both Hui Muslim. Yang transformed the homoerotic love described by Sāʿdī and elaborated by Ahmed into a heteroerotic one. Against Sāʿdī's rendition of it as homoerotic love between Sultan Mahmud and his male slave, Ayaz, both Wang and Yang changed it into a love story between a king and a "female consort" (Jabbari and Tsai 2020: 16). In translating it, Yang in particular sought to retain what he took as resonating with Islamic tradition (Asad 1986). Hence, he focused on piety, good morals, harmonious social order, and so on. Contra Ahmed, Yang is not only reading what is given by Sāʿdī; rather, he is rewriting Sāʿdī's text; indeed, Yang seems to advise Sāʿdī: look, this is how *gulistāñ* should have been composed. As for references to wine-drinking in *gulistāñ*, in his Preface to Yang's translation, Zhang Zongqi candidly states that since alcohol is *ḥarām*, words like "drunk" in it should be taken metaphorically, not literally (Jabbari and Tsai 2020: 14).[11]

Focusing on the subject of alcohol and Islam, so far I have critically discussed Ahmed's engagement with it and how ultimately it is dependent on the question of what he takes as orthodoxy. To this end, I dwelled predominantly on his text, for the full appraisal of which, I submit, we ought to trace, track, and traverse its "pre-text," the task set for the section below.

The Pre-Text of *What is Islam*? Notes on Participant Objectivation

To study "primitive," "other" cultures, participant observation is key to anthropology (Ahmad 2021a). However, Bourdieu (2003: 281–283, italics in original) proposes participant objectivation: "*objectivation of the subject of objectivation*, of the analyzing subject—in short, of the researcher herself" (italics in original). Citing Charles Soulié's work, he notes that the topics of researchers are "linked to social origins and trajectory, gender, and above all to educational trajectory." That is, we need to discern scholars' "professional universe . . . its [inter]national traditions . . . its mandatory problematics . . . its specific censorships . . . [the] structure of the

discipline . . . and . . . the unconscious presuppositions built into . . . categories of scholarly understanding." This is pertinent to grasp Ahmed and his point of view. A viewpoint, after all, is a view accessed from a point, itself often hidden. Here I zoom in on Ahmed's interest in alcohol and orthodoxy.

In 2017, Queen Mary University, London organized a symposium on *What is Islam*? Ahmed's sister, Shahla Ahmed, a doctor, was asked to speak about her brother "in the context of him being a Muslim and . . . his general views in [about] Islam." She began by saying that her brother was "born into a Muslim family" in Singapore. Within hours of his birth in a Christian hospital, a nun took him to a chapel and "sprinkled him with holy water, baptized [him]," and then gave the baby to her parents who were "quite laid back about the whole thing." Her father had also "whispered *azān* [call to prayer] into his ears." Their parents were from Pakistan and at the time of Ahmed's birth worked as doctors in Singapore, largely an artifact of British colonialism as a trade entrepôt (Ang and Stratton 2018; Pieris 2009: 64–65). Ahmed's mother raised him in "a very non-traditional South Asian" way. He went first to a British primary school, a "kind of Church of England," and then to a Methodist school established in 1886. Later, he attended the UK's Caterham School (see also Harvard University n.d.), founded in 1811 as a boarding school for children of Congregational ministers (Caterham n.d.). To conclude her speech, Shahla marked Ahmed's "fondness" for wine. She showed a photo of him in a fancy bottle shop to stress how he felt he was "in good company with Jahangir, Ġhālib, and other writers he adored in his appreciation of wine" (QMUL 2017b). In his sister's account, his adoration for Jahangir and Ġhālib seems due to Ahmed's love for wine, not due to Jahangir's quality as a ruler or Ġhālib's poetic beauty.

From Bourdieu's frame, it is plausible that Islam and alcohol as Ahmed's problématique have traces of his biography and educational trajectory drawn above. I have already shown how wine has been integral to Western Christianity as Jesus' blood.[12] Since the modern and secular is neither an unsullied continuity of premodern Christianity nor a break from it (Ahmad 2017), to see wine-drinking only as a secular act is obstructive. Consider the term "implicit religion" by Edward Bailey (d. 2015), an Anglican priest (Hughes 2015: 15). To Bailey, "secular" activities were also religious. Hence the term "implicit religion," which Bailey (1990: 490) developed out of his doctoral study based on participant observation. He became a bartender in a pub to observe its visitors who were Christians. Bailey titled a part of his field report "The Pub and Implicit Religion." In the pub, he saw "community" and a "moral system" at work, for example, in buying drinks and in interactions between visitors and barmen. The drink was not a thing to quench thirst. "The drink itself is all-important," wrote Bailey (ibid.: 491), for it is an "ideology" for "the sacrament of the community." Bailey's report about "the sacrament of the community" seems to make pub and church conjunctional.

It is not surprising, then, that against its lexical meaning, to drink in Euro-American culture means to consume alcohol. To the question, 'do you drink?' by my Western or Christian friends—secular, religious, atheist, agnostic—my answer that 'I do' shocks them, often positively. The impression invoked is that I am liberal, secular; not closed or orthodox. But when I clarify that I drink juice or soft drinks then the conversation shifts to what 'drink' means. An identical reply to the same question posed to a non-Muslim has radically different meanings, however. In 2013, the Dalai Lama visited Sydney. He was asked the same question and his reply was similar. The response of my Australian friend present at the dinner was revealing: you know, the Dalai Lama doesn't drink; he is 'spiritual.'

My contention about drinking alcohol as a cultivated practice rather than as 'natural' is better illustrated with an account of its practice in South Asia, which Ahmed's sister referred to as their family's background. While forbidding alcohol to the priestly Brahmin caste, the ancient Hindu

lawyer Manu allowed it to lower castes on occasions like war and religious ceremonies. Given the existence of stern rules as to who could drink, alcohol, however, was not central to people's dietary culture. With India under colonial rule, the British "promoted alcohol use." Drinking alcohol thus became a sign of being "modern" for Westernizing elites and it came to be "associated with a Western way of life." From being episodic, it "became a part of routine everyday social intercourse and entertainment" (Saxena 1999: 38, 39; see also Saxena 1997). In villages, for those who imbibe local alcoholic drinks, it is still not a part of routine dinner the way it is in the vignette of Ahmed's where a Muslim drinks alcohol at a party in Princeton. In Bihar, there is a non-twice-born Hindu caste, *pāsī*, associated with collecting, processing, and selling local alcohol, *tāṛī*, from palm (*tāṛ*) and date trees. A *pāsī* man climbs all the way to the top of a palm tree to collect the juice in an earthen pot placed there the evening before (see Figure 1). And it is consumed in hutlike shops before or after, not during, meals, with drinkers sitting on the bare floor. In Ahmed's case, as narrated by his sister, it is not alcohol in an earthen jug. Rather, it is branded and in a fancy bottle the shape and size of which and the ingredients within which are minutely debated in the drinking class. Drinking wine at Princeton thus becomes quite different from consuming *tāṛī* in a hut; it is a matter of distinction (Bourdieu 1986). Ahmed's vignette seems to announce that, as a Muslim, perhaps one from the subcontinent, he too is 'modern,' not 'orthodox.' After all, to the 'uncivilized' world, modernity meant wine and Christianity. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1998: 38) Nietzsche termed alcohol and Christianity "the two great European narcotics." And in *The Gay Science* (2001: 129), he asked: "What do savage tribes today take over first of all from the Europeans? Liquor and Christianity, the narcotics of Europe." From Nietzsche's framework, Ciaccio's (2018: 119) reading of "modernity itself . . . [as] heavily narcotized" appears fascinating.

The Urdu novel *Ibnul Vaqt*, published in 1888 and written by Dipti Nazeer Ahmad (1831–1912), showcases mechanisms of Westernization. A Muslim employee in the new British administration, Ibnul Vaqt is also its protagonist. He represents Westernization (or rather, to use Jalal al-e-Ahmad's evocative term, Westoxification),[13] such that he begins to imitate the British, including their mode of eating. Against the local practice of using one's hand, he uses a knife and fork. And rather than eating seated on the floor (*farsh*), he uses a dining table (Ahmad 1980). My point is not just about consuming alcohol, but when, where, and how, the historical constel-

Figure 1 (From Left to Right): A *pāsī* man climbs the palm tree (*tāṛ*), reaches its top to collect *tāṛi*, and, on return, has it in an earthen jug: Khortha, north Bihar, India. Photos by Mohammad Modassir, 2023.

lation of which bestows a new meaning onto that act as 'modern' and worthy. Turkey probably exemplifies this affinity between alcohol and modernity most tellingly.

Titled *Parallel Lives*, an Italian travel book on Turkey compares Kemal Atatürk and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vis-à-vis their nicknames, education, political projects, and, yes, favorite drinks. Under drink for Atatürk is written: "He was a heavy *raki* drinker; having been fond of beer as a young man." *Raki* is a Turkish alcoholic drink. For Erdoğan, it says: "He likes carrot juice and maintains that *ayran*—made with yoghurt and salt—is the only national drink" (see Figure 2). The kinship the book indicated between drinks and political disposition actually played itself out in public. Invoking environmental concerns, in 2006, Istanbul's Üsküdar municipality issued an edict not to drink alcohol on the Bosphorus's banks. A protest followed, with journalist Deniz Som in the lead. Som exhorted the people to defy the edict because "drinking in public space was a form of protest against sharia, and for liberalism" (Biçer-Deveci and Bourmaud 2021: 2).

Orthodoxy as a problématique of Ahmed's doctoral dissertation, to which, as documented earlier, *What is Islam?* is but a supplement, also has a pre-text, an exposition of which through a Bourdieuian lens is in order. Note that at Harvard University Ahmed also taught a "regular seminar" course on "Orthodoxy: Truth and Authority," which, he writes, "provided me with the pretext" to read many works (xv). But is orthodoxy as a subject of inquiry entirely his own or does it spring from the academic field Ahmed worked in—a field, to cite Bourdieu, as a "professional universe . . . its habits of thoughts, its mandatory problematics . . . [and] the unconscious presuppositions built into . . . categories of scholarly understanding"? It follows that Ahmed's interest in orthodoxy is far from innocent; rather, he seems to lift it from the canon of Orientalism to reinscribe it in the context of the new Cold War signed, among others, by the Rushdie Affair, and waged against "global Islamism" and "Islamist terrorism" (Falkenhayner 2010). Before the rise of "Islamist terrorism," Orientalism deployed other terms to name the same referent, however. In his 1871 book, *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?*, W. W. Hunter, a colonial servant in India and fellow of both the Ethnological Society, London and the Royal Institute of Netherlands India, The Hague, used "fanatic/fanaticism" (e.g., 9, 11, 14, 20, 44, 115) and "orthodox" (e.g., 59, 76, 117, 127) more or less interchangeably.[14] In *Islam Observed*, Clifford Geertz (1968) expressed the meaning of orthodoxy through the term "scripturalist," which, as I read Varisco (2005: 32), largely functioned at that time as a substitute for fundamentalism, a term prevalent after the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Figure 2: A travel book published in Italy compares Atatürk and Erdoğan regarding their favorite drink (Smith 2021: 26, 27).

Long before orthodoxy acted as the axis of Rice's book discussed earlier, it had already figured in Goldziher's text (1981: 97, 150, 152), which took "the orthodox dogma" as stating that the Qur'ān is "uncreated." Presenting orthodoxy as rigidity and dogmatism, Goldziher praised Sufism as a "spiritual liberation, an expansion of the constricted religious horizon, over against the legal and doctrinal system of official Islam." As in Ahmed's text, juxtaposition of *Sufism/spiritual* and the *constricted religious*/Islamic is on full display in Goldziher too. And only two pages after this citation, Goldziher quotes al-Tilimsānī, a student of Ibn ʿArabī, saying: "the Qur'ān is *shirk* . . . pure and simple" (after which the author cites, again perhaps expectedly, Shams-i-Tabrīz and Rūmī).[15] Is this not similar to Ahmed's tirade against orthodoxy when he says that "by uttering the Satanic verses, Muḥammad thus committed the error of compromising the fundamental . . . principle of the Divine Message . . . unicity (*tawḥīd*)"? Unsurprisingly, of the six chapters in Goldziher's book, spanning 267 pages, Chapter 4, "Asceticism and Sufism," constitutes 51 pages, giving a rather long treatment. The longer exposition on Sufism by Goldziher resembles similar treatment of Sufism by Rice and subsequently by Ahmed.

Mujeeb's (2003: book jacket, 70, 57; italics mine) historical account, *Indian Muslims*, is characteristically ideographic and clinically divided into three periods: early, middle, and modern. Each begins with a chapter titled "Orthodoxy and the Orthodox." With no rationale given for the book's organization along this line and why orthodoxy should so prominently figure in it, Mujeeb reproduces the problématique dominant in the field of the study of Islam. He, therefore, feels no need to theoretically examine—let alone compare—what orthodoxy is and how it has become a problématique in the first place. Like Goldziher, he makes orthodoxy a twin to "restrictions." Elsewhere, he presents it in contrast to "innovation." And, as in Goldziher and Rice, in Mujeeb too—and likewise, for Ahmed—orthodoxy's rival is Sufism, to which a separate chapter is reserved. That Mujeeb is an Indian "progressive" Muslim by no means lessens the colonial weight of a question his book asks, in the footsteps of Hunter: "Have the Indian Muslims . . . possessed any . . . rights to . . . *oppose the ruler*?"

In Lieu of a Conclusion: From 'Being Islamic' to 'Becoming Muslim'

The subject of wine is one of the six questions around which Ahmed organizes *What is Islam*? and I have taken it as paradigmatic of his larger definitional intervention, itself an attachment to his main doctoral inquiry into what he calls "Islamic orthodoxy." In this lecture, I have argued that both Ahmed's question and his response to it are untenable on many grounds: methodological and theoretical alike. I have shown how Ahmed's reading of Ġhālib suffers from an absence of methodology about how to read an author's corpus, which in Ġhālib's case traverses languages (Farsi and Urdu) as well as genres (prose and poetry). A similar problem is evident in his treatment of Sāʿdī's prosimetrum *gulistāñ*, especially the subjects of homoeroticism and alcohol in it. Predisposed to emphasize authorial aim, Ahmed has very little to say about how *gulistāñ* was received either in the original or in translation. And was it received in the same ways as Ahmed reads Sāʿdī? By discussing its translation into Chinese, I demonstrated how readers choose to read a text by editing it and retaining what they deem valuable. *Gulistāñ* in Chinese is not a straightforward translation; rather, it is almost a new text, which seems to instruct Sāʿdī: see, this is how you should have crafted *gulistāñ*.

As for Ahmed's theory, there is hardly any. If by theory we mean a distinct body of knowledge with a set of concepts, methods, questions, and a tradition of robust inquiry, Ahmed doesn't situate himself into one. Since the prime aim is to destabilize the notion of orthodoxy based on the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, or law (97), theory seems to be peripheral, even irrelevant. As Ahmed

is an intellectual historian, it is astonishing to see no mention of, let alone an engagement with, Quentin Skinner (1969), a pioneer of this field in Britain (on which see Whatmore 2016) and whom intellectual historian of Islam Khaled El-Rouayheb (2018) discusses, or Reinhart Koselleck (2004), a leading scholar of *begriffsgeschichte* in Germany.

Given the primacy of concepts in *begriffsgeschichte*, it is appropriate to also point out that Ahmed's text is packed with pet Orientalist categories: Islamic, Muslim, or Arab "conquest" (144, 356, 480n157), "Indic/Hindu" (90, 447; cf. Asif 2020; Ahmad 2023b), and "the Middle East" (138, 220; cf. Ahmad 2011), for instance. To take up "conquests," the word used in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu is *futuḥāt* (sing. *fataḥ*), which Orientalists gloss with this meaning. As Talal Asad refuses to translate *sharīʿa* (in Ahmad 2015: 264), so I suggest we should do with *futuḥāt*. If necessary, in fidelity to the original it should be glossed as opening/s.[16] Over generations, Orientalists, however, translated it as 'conquest' because of their subscription, implicit or explicit, to the "religion of the sword" theory (Eaton 1985: 107). To them, Islam spread on account of earthly fear and violence. That 'Umar Ibn al-ḳhaṭṭāb, an arch enemy of the Prophet determined to kill him, embraced Islam just by reading and hearing the message and beauty of Sūrat Ṭāhā (at the home of his sister whom, shortly before, he had assaulted for having accepted Islam; see Ahmad 2022: 75–76) is habitually effaced. Using "conquest" is misleading on another count. Conquest is not simply taking control of a country or territory; it is also the violent destruction of a people, their resources, cultures, languages, religions—a feature integral to European conquest, for instance, of the Americas and of Australia and New Zealand (Moses 2008). To read the history of Islam identically is to understand neither Islam nor history nor conquest. It is worth reminding ourselves that the Doctrine of Discovery was invented to disguise and sanctify European conquest (Miller 2019). My point, then, is: how can Ahmed fashion a "new perspective" while he is heavily dependent on old keywords or terms? That Muslims themselves use them is no justification for his approach's accuracy or propriety. Ahmed's formulation that "as long as the Muslim actor is making his act of violence meaningful to himself in terms of Islam . . . then it is appropriate . . . to speak of that act of violence as Islamic violence" is, therefore, problematic. Bruce Lawrence (2021: xxi) rightly marks how this formulation leads to the indefensible proposition that "there are no 'bad' Muslims and there is no 'incorrect' Islam." To Lawrence's sharp observation, one should add that owing to the continuing coloniality of British and Western Orientalism, even today in India some call themselves Muhammadan. As noted earlier, Sayyid Ahmad Khan named his college the 'Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College.' On occasions, scholars should even go, as anthropologist David Graeber (2011: 28) avers, against their informants' own views. At stake, then, is not the presumed rightness of the term simply because Muslims use or used it, but the need to inquire into when, how, and why they began to describe themselves as Muhammadan, and which power and knowledge matrix enabled this shift.

Based on a thorough, extensive, critical engagement with Ahmed's text—its argument, framing, sources, method, and more—I find its description as "a new way of looking at Islam" and "strikingly original" unconvincing. Taking paradigm as a method derived from Aristotle and elaborated by Agamben, I examined the issue of wine and Islam as paradigmatic of Ahmed's larger claim. To this end, I showed how both his question and response thereto are far from original; in fact, the question about wine is characteristically Christian and secular—one that, to use anthropology's idiom, is etic, not emic. In greater detail and with compelling evidence, I have demonstrated how he disregards diverse, rich debate on alcohol in long histories of Islamic scholarship to maintain his binary framing of it in terms of contradiction. Notably, I have identified and discussed how key elements of Ahmed's claims were advanced long ago, though differently, by scholars like Michael Gilsenan, Goldziher, Muhammad Mujeeb, and notably, Cyprian Rice. The significance of theoretical questions and methodological issues emergent from my

engagement with Ahmed, as I see it, is relevant to the study of religion, Islam, and the power–knowledge matrix on which modernity is predicated.

I want to end by suggesting that a more fruitful way of conceptualizing Islam is not to see it in terms of *being Islamic*, as Ahmed does, but *becoming Muslim*. That is, shifting our focus from Ahmed's adjective to the notion of becoming will allow us to ask different and hopefully better questions. Against Ahmed's reading of him, I take Ġhālib as a figure who indeed signifies the idea of *becoming Muslim*. That Ġhālib asked questions—deep and challenging—does not mean that a believer lacks doubt. There is hardly any atheist devoid of all beliefs in the same way that there is hardly any believer free from any doubt. Some friends of Ahmed laudably narrate a story about him. In a class at Harvard University, a student asked Ahmed: are you a Muslim? Rather than reply, he turned to the blackboard and wrote his own name (QMUL 2017a). Compare this with Ġhālib's reply to the same question asked by Colonel Brown. Ġhālib's reply and the subsequent quotation from him that I provided recognize his own weakness characterized by humility, which synthetically gestures toward transformation, to becoming, *not* being. This attitude does not seem to be present in the reply from Ahmed, who, like Ġhālib but unlike the figure in the vignette with which I began this lecture, drank and loved wine (QMUL 2017b).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank, first of all, Daromir Rudnyckyj, President, Society for the Anthropology of Religion (SAR), for the invitation to deliver the 2023 Roy Rappaport Distinguished Lecture for the SAR Biannual Meeting held at the University of Victoria, Canada, in May 2023. I am honored to have been invited to give this lecture and to figure in the list of my predecessors who have significantly contributed to anthropology and public knowledge. I am grateful to Talal Asad (in parenthesis, it is relevant to note that he delivered the inaugural Rappaport lecture), Peter van der Veer, Bruce Lawrence, and Rizwan Ahmad for their detailed comments on an earlier draft of the lecture. At Ibn Haldun University (IHU), I had fruitful discussions about this lecture's theme with many a colleague: Alev Erkilet, Burhan Köroğlu, Fatih Çalişir, and Muhammet İkbal Bakir. Ibrar Bhatt (Queen's University Belfast) was generous to offer many useful suggestions on an earlier draft, especially on matters relating to translation. In August 2024, I presented a version of the post-Rappaport lecture in a seminar at Monash University, Australia. I thank Julian Millie, an anthropologist of Indonesia and Islam, for the invitation. For assistance with the search for literature, I thank Mushtaq Ahmad Wani and Mazen Alagawany, my research and teaching assistants. I am grateful to Tehseen Nazir (IHU) for helping organize the Rappaport lecture online, the only option after I did not get the Canadian visa to deliver it in person (the visa arrived long after the lecture). Finally, I thank Simon Coleman, the editor of this journal, for his excellent suggestions and guidance all along. To state the obvious, I alone am responsible for the perspective this lecture advances, as I am for any error or shortcoming it may have.

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NOTES

1. Bombay's three-kilometre-long road between Chowpatty Beach in the north and Nariman Point in the south is known as the Queen's Necklace (viewed from the sky, it looks like a necklace).
2. All in-text citations consisting solely of page references refer to Ahmed (2016).
3. Ahmed's voluminous book is peculiar. Fond of italicizing his own prose in one place but not doing the same when using it almost identically elsewhere (e.g., this quotation appears on p. 544), his text is rather repetitive. Citations are often lengthy: in one instance four pages long (463–466).
4. On transliteration rules for Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Hindi words, see Ahmad (2017: xxii–xxv).
5. For an early account of reception of Ahmed's book, see Mian (2020).
6. In Agamben's (2009: 10ff.) reading, Kuhn used paradigm as a "set of techniques, models, and values" espoused by a scientific community and in the sense similar to his own (Agamben's). On usage of paradigm as a method, see Ahmad (2023a).
7. As does his 1998 article based on the doctoral work. An encyclopedia entry by Ahmed mentions it only in the last short paragraph, stating that Rushdie's novel "didn't reopen the debate . . . over the historicity of the satanic verses incidence. Its only result was reiteration of the orthodox view" (Ahmed 2004: 535).
8. The source of all translations from the Qur'ān by Muhammad Asad, Yusuf Ali, and Piktal is Alim.org, https://www.alim.org/quran/ (accessed 28 January 2024).
9. Habitus has now become linked to the French sociologist Bourdieu. His exposition is problematic, however, as it ignores contributions made by Muslim philosophers from al-Fārābi, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Khaldun to Muhammad ʿAbduh. Derived from the work of Aristotle, for the Greek *hexis* and Roman habitus, the frequently used word for it in Muslim tradition is *malaka*; for an excellent treatment, see Naaman (2017). Bourdieu's (1990: 52, 53–54) framing of it vis-à-vis "positivist materialism" and "intellectualist idealism" doesn't quite address my concern. My usage synthesizes insights both from Bourdieu or Western traditions and from Islamic ones.
10. Mohammad Shakeel, professor of Farsi at the University of Calcutta, India, made a similar observation (personal communication, April 2023).
11. On the tradition of depicting the beloved as male in Persian poetry, see the biography of Sāʿdī by Ḥālī (1837–1914), a noted figure of Urdu literature. He offers an interesting explanation, contrasting it with different conventions in Arabic and Hindi poetic traditions. Sociologically, he also accounts for the place of women in Arab social formations; see Ḥālī (1970: 151–156).
12. Pastor James Wuye told me that Christians in Nigeria shunned alcohol on theological grounds. Wuye and I were part of a panel organized by UNDP (see UNDP Oslo Gove 2016).
13. Westoxification or Westoxication is a translation of the Persian term *ġharbzadegī*, coined by Jalal al-e Ahmad, an Iranian secular intellectual; see *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (2003).
14. Halil İnalcık, a Turkish historian, argued that "the triumph of fanaticism" in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century ended the intellectual flourishing of earlier centuries; see El-Rouayheb (2008).
15. Jalāl-ud-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) is quite a famous Farsi poet, well known in the Western world too, mostly as a Sufi. Shams-i-Tabrīz (d. 1248) was Rūmī's spiritual teacher (*ustād*).
16. I gained clarity about 'opening' as its apt translation in discussions, first, with Hatim Bazian, University of California, Berkeley (July 2022) and later with Rizwan Ahmad, University of Qatar (August 2023) and Sami Al Arian, Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University (October 2023).

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