Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace

Irfan Ahmad
Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 300 pages.

Christianity was the religion of spirit (and freedom), and critiqued Islam as a religion of flesh (and slavery); later, Christianity was the religion of reason, and critiqued Islam as the religion of fideism; later still, Christianity was the religion of the critique of religion, and critiqued Islam as the most atavistic of religions. Even now, when the West has critiqued its own Christianity enough to be properly secular (because free, rational, and critical), it continues to critique Islam for being not secular enough. In contrast to Christianity or post-Christian secularism, then, and despite their best efforts, Islam does not know (has not learned from) critique. This sentiment is articulated at multiple registers, academic and popular and governmental: Muslims are fanatical about their repressive law; they interpret things too literally; Muslims do not read their own revelation critically, let alone literature or cartoons; their sartorial practices are unreasonable; the gates of *ijtihād* closed in 900CE; Ghazali killed free inquiry in Islam… Such claims are ubiquitous enough to be unremarkable, and have political traction among liberals and conservatives alike. "The equation of Islam with the absence of critique has a longer genealogy in Western thought," Irfan Ahmad writes in this book, "which runs almost concurrently with Europe's colonial expansion" (8). Luther and Renan figure in that history, as more recently do Huntington and Gellner and Rushdie and Manji.

Meanwhile in the last decade an interdisciplinary conversation about the stakes, limits, complicities, and possibilities of critique has developed in the anglophone academy, a conversation of which touchstones include the polemical exchange between Saba Mahmood and Stathis Gourgouris (2008); the co-authored volume *Is Critique Secular?* (2009), by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Mahmood; journal special issues dedicated to the question (e.g. *boundary 2* 40, no. 1 [2013]); and Gourgouris's *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (2013), among others. At the same time, the discipline of religious studies remains trapped in an argument over the limits of normative analysis and the possibility of critical knowledge.

Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace seeks to turn these debates on their head. Is critique secular? De-

cidedly not—but understanding why that is, for Ahmad, requires revising our understanding of critique itself. Instead of the object of critique, religion here emerges as an agent of critique. By this account, God himself is the source of critique, and the prophets and their heirs are "critics par excellence" (xiv). The book is divided into two parts bookended by a prologue and epilogue. "Formulation" comprises three chapters levying the shape of the argument. "Illustration" comprises three chapters taking up the case study of the South Asian reformer Abul-Aʿla Maududi and his critics (especially regarding his views on the state and on women) as well as a fourth chapter that seeks to locate critique in the space of the everyday.

There are four theses to Ahmad's argument, none of them radically original on their own but newly assembled. As spelled out in the first chapter ("Introduction"), the first thesis holds that the Enlightenment reconfiguration of Christianity was in fact an ethnic project by which "Europe/the West constituted its identity in the name of reason and universalism against a series of others," among them Islam (14). The second thesis is that no critic judges by reason alone. Rather, critique is always situated, directed, and formed: it requires presuppositions and a given mode to be effective (17). The third thesis is that the Islamic tradition of critique stipulates the complementarity of intellect (*ʿaql, dimāgh*) and heart (*qalb, dil*); this is a holistic anthropology, not a dualistic one. The fourth thesis is that critique should not be understood as the exclusive purview of intellectuals (especially when arguing about literature) or as simply a theoretical exercise. Instead, critique should be approached as part of life, practiced by the literate and the illiterate alike (18).

The second chapter, "Critique: Western and/or Islamic," focuses on the first of these theses. The Enlightenment immunized the West from critique while subjecting the Rest to critique. An "anthropology of philosophy" approach can treat Kant's transcendental idealism as a social practice and in doing so discover that philosophy is "not entirely independent" from ethnicity (37). The certainty offered by the Enlightenment project can thus be read as "a project of security with boundaries." Ahmad briefly considers the place of Islam across certain of Kant's writings and the work of the French *philosophes*; he reads their efforts to "secure knowledge of humanity" to foreclose the possibility of "knowledge *from* humanity" (42), namely Europe's others. Meanwhile, ethnographic approaches to Muslim debates shy away from according them the status of critique, but in so doing they only maintain the opposition between Western reason and Islamic unreason. In contrast to this view (from Kant through Foucault), Ahmad would

rather locate the point of critical rupture with the past in the axial age (800-200BCE), which would include the line of prophets who reformed (critiqued) their societies for having fallen into corruption and paganism. This alternative account demonstrates that "critical inquiry presupposes a tradition," that is, that effective critique is always immanent (58).

The third chapter, "The Modes: Another Genealogy of Critique," contests the reigning historiography of "critique" (*tanqīd*/*naqd*) in South Asia that restricts it to secular literary criticism. Critique (like philosophy and democracy) was not simply founded in Grecian antiquity and inherited by Europe: Ahmad "liberates" critique from its Western pedigree and so allows for his alternative genealogy, as constructed for instance through readings of Ghalib. The remainder of the chapter draws on the work of Maududi and his critics to present the mission of the prophets as critiquing to reform (*iṣlāḥ*) their societies. This mandate remains effective today, and Maududi and his critics articulate a typology of acceptable (*tanqīd*) and unacceptable (*ta'īb, tanqīṣ, tazhīk, takfīr,* etc.) critiques in which the style of critique must be considered alongside its object and telos.

Religion as Critique oscillates between sweeping literature reviews and close readings. Readers may find the former dizzying, especially when they lose in depth what they gain in breadth (for example, ten pages at hand from chapter 2 cite 44 different authors, some of whom are summarizing or contesting the work of a dozen other figures named but not cited directly). Likewise there are moments when Ahmad's own dogged critiques may read as tendentious. The political purchase of this book should not be understated, though the fact that Muslims criticize themselves and others should come as no surprise. Yet it is chapters 4–6 (on Maududi and his critics) which substantiate the analytic ambition of the book. They are the most developed chapters of the book and detail a set of emerging debates with a fine-grained approach sometimes found wanting elsewhere (especially in the final chapter). They show how Islam as a discursive tradition is constituted through critique, and perhaps always has been: for against the disciplinary proclivities of anthropologists (who tend to emphasize discontinuity and rupture, allowing them to discover the modern invention of traditions), Ahmad insists on an epistemic connection among precolonial and postcolonial Islam. This connection is evident in how the theme of rupture/continuity is itself a historical topos of "Islamic critical thinking."

Chapter 4 ("The Message: A Critical Enterprise") approaches Maududi (d. 1979) as a substantial political thinker, not simply the fundamentalist ideologue he is often considered to be. Reading across Maududi's oeuvre,

Ahmad gleans a political-economic critique of colonial-capitalist exploitation (95), a keen awareness of the limits of majoritarian democracy, and a warning about the dispossessive effects of minoritization. Maududi's Islamism ("theodemocracy"), then, has to be understood within his broader project of the revival of religion to which *tanqīd* ("critique"), *tajdīd* ("renewal"), and *ijtihād* ("understanding Islam's universal principles to determine change") were central (103). He found partial historical models for such renewal in ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, Ahmad Sirhindi, and Shah Wali Ullah. A key element of this critique is that it does not aim to usher in a different future. Instead it inhabits a more complicated temporality: it clarifies what is already the case, as rooted in the primordial nature of humans (*fiṭra*), and in so doing aligns the human with the order of creation. This project entails the critique and rejection of false gods, including communism, fascism, national socialism, and capitalism (117).

Chapter 5 ("The State: (In)dispensible, Desirable, Revisable?") weaves together ethnographic and textual accounts of Maududi's critics and defenders on the question of the state (the famous argument for "divine sovereignty"). In doing so the chapter demonstrates how the work of critique is undertaken in this Islamic tradition, where, Ahmad writes, "critique is connected to a form of life the full meaning of which is inseparable from death" (122). (This also means that at stake in critique is also the style and principles of critique.) The critics surveyed in this chapter include Manzur Nomani, Vahiduddin Khan, Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, Amir Usmani, Sadruddin Islahi, Akram Zurti, Rahmat Bedar, Naqi Rahman, Ijaz Akbar, and others, figures of varying renown but all of whom closely engaged, defended, and contested Maududi's work and legacy in the state politics of his Jamaat-e Islami.

Chapter 6 ("The Difference: Women and In/equality") shows how Maududi's followers critique the "neopatriarchate" he proposes. Through such critique, Ahmad also seeks to affirm the legitimacy of a "nonpatriarchal reading of Islam" (156). If Maududi himself regarded the *ḥarem* as "the mightiest fortress of Islamic culture" (159)—a position which Ahmad notes is "enmeshed in the logic of colonial hegemony"—he also desired that women "form their own associations and unbiasedly critique the government" (163). Maududi's work and legacy is thus both "disabling" and "enabling" for women at the same time, as is borne out by tracing the critiques it subsequently faced (including by those sympathetic to his broader project). The (male) critics surveyed here include Akram Zurti, Sultan Ahmad Islahi, Abdurrahman Alkaf, and Mohammad Akram Nadwi, who seriously

engaged the Quran and hadith to question Maududi's "neopatriarchate." They critiqued his views (e.g. that women were naturally inferior to men, or that they were unfit for political office) through alternative readings of Islamic history and theology.

Chapter 7 ("The Mundane: Critique as Social-Cultural Practice") seeks to locate critique at "the center of life for everyone, including ordinary subjects with no educational degrees" (179). Ahmad writes at length about Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (d. 1988), the anticolonial activist who led a massive movement against colonial domination, and whose following faced British brutality with nonviolence. The Khudai Khidmatgār movement he built was "a movement of critique" (195), Ahmad writes, composed of ordinary men and women, peasants and the unlettered. The brief remainder of the chapter suggests that the proverbs which punctuate everyday life (for example, in the trope of the greedy mullah) also act as critiques.

By the end of *Religion as Critique* it is difficult not to see critique nascent in every declaration or action. This deflates the analytic power of the term—but perhaps that is one unstated aim of the project, to reveal critique as simply a part of life. Certainly the book displaces the exceptional Western claim to critique. Yet this trope of exposure—anthropology as cultural critique, the ethnographer's gaze turned inward—also raises questions of its own. In this case, the paradigmatic account of critique (Western, secular) has been exposed as actually being provincial. But the means of this exposure have not come from the alternative tradition of critique Ahmad elaborates. That is, Ahmad is not himself articulating an Islamic critique of Western critique. (Maududi serves as an "illustration" of Ahmad's argument; Maududi does not provide the argument itself.) In the first chapters ("Formulation") he cites a wide literature that practices historicism, genealogy, archeology, and deconstruction in order to temper the universal claims of Western supremacists. The status of these latter critical practices however is not explored, as to whether they are in themselves sufficient to provincialize or at least de-weaponize Western critique. Put more directly: is there is a third language (of political anthropology, for example) by which Ahmad analytically mediates the encounter between rival traditions of critique? And if there is such a language, and if it is historically, structurally, and institutionally related to one of the critical traditions it is mediating, then what is the status of the non-Western "illustration"?

The aim of this revision of critique, Ahmad writes, is "genuinely democratic dialogue with different traditions" (xii). As much is signalled in its citational practices, which (for example) reference Talal Asad and Viveiros

de Castro together in calling for "robust comparison" (14) between Western and Islamic notions of critique, and reference Maududi and Koselleck together in interpreting critique to be about judgment (203). No matter that Asad and de Castro or Maududi and Koselleck mean different things when using the same words; these citations express Ahmad's commitment to a dialogic (rather than dialectical) mode in engaging differences. Yet because Ahmad does not himself explore what is variously entailed by "comparison" or "judgment" in these moments, such citations remain assertions gesturing to a dialogue to come. In this sense *Religion as Critique* is a thoroughly optimistic book. Whether such optimism is warranted might call for a third part to follow "Formulation" and "Illustration": "Reckoning."

Basit Kareem Iqbal
PhD candidate, Department of Anthropology
and Program in Critical Theory
University of California, Berkeley