Book Review

Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 463 pages. ISBN: 9783458710332, Price: €34.

Isabel Toral-Niehoff

Free University of Berlin

(itoral@zedat.fu-berlin.de)

"This turns out to be one of the best books about Islam in ages and is set to become a classic of cultural studies on par with Edward Said's Orientalism*."*

- Stefan Weidner, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* [1]

It is surprising that the book lauded here as being on a par with Said's seminal work *Orientalism* is still relatively unknown within Islamic studies, despite being published in 2011. Thomas Bauer's *Kultur der Ambiguität* seems to be one of those works that draws more attention and provokes more enthusiasm in the neighboring disciplines than in in its own field. So it still remains that this book, which has enjoyed great reception in the German media and has inspired several interdisciplinary workshops,[2] is still in need of critical evaluation within the field, particularly for a specialist readership outside Germany (an English translation is in the making[3]). I will first summarize by chapter this ambitious and comprehensive book. I will then assess Bauer's argumentation and analyze his underlying theoretical assumptions, as well as discuss the applicability of the concept he is introducing, i.e. the notion of 'cultural ambiguity' (*Kulturelle Ambiguität*).

The book is divided into ten chapters: the first two are introductory and methodological, the following seven chiefly thematic, covering a broad range

1. Quoted in the publisher's English version of the book's homepage: http://www.suhrkamp.de/buecher/the_culture_of_ambiguity-thomas_bauer_71033.html?d_view=english (accessed September 23, 2016).

2. E.g. the conference held in Erlangen in 2012: *Neue Fundamentalismen – Ambiguität und die Macht der Eindeutigkeit* (http://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-19469) and the conference organized in Greifswald in 2013: *Ambiguität im Mittelalter. Formen zeitgenössischer Reflexion und interdisziplinärer Rezeption* (http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-4872; both webpages accessed on September 23, 2016).

3. See the book's English homepage mentioned in note 1. The only extensive review in a scientific journal is still that of Irene Schneider (in German), *Der Islam* 88 (2012), 439-448. She focuses in particular on his understanding of Islamic law and her assessment is rather critical.

of topics from the Qurʾān and Arabic literature to sexuality discourses and philosophy. The final chapter contains a concluding discussion. Bauer formulates the basic assumptions and purposes of the book in the first chapter (15-25):

> 1) There has been a radical shift in Islamic culture, from a broadly tolerant attitude towards 'cultural ambiguity' and plurality in pre-modern times to an increasing intolerance, as exemplified today by fundamentalist Islam. This change should be investigated.
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> 2) The phenomenon called 'cultural ambiguity' is universal; however, there are important differences in the cultural attitude towards it. Some cultures are more prone to tolerate ambiguity (they are 'ambiguity-tolerant'), while others try to eradicate ambiguity (they are 'ambiguity-intolerant'). There is a need to investigate cultures from this perspective.
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> 3) The book aims to establish a new narrative of Islamic history (*eine andere Geschichte des Islams*), by focusing on the aforementioned question on the basis of several key-texts merging from the lesser known post-formative period of Islam (in particular of the Ayyūbid and Mamluk period in Egypt and Syria between 1180 and 1500). Bauer assumes that this period represents that form of "Islamic culture", which came into contact with Western Modernity in the nineteenth century (24), that makes it particularly relevant to the topic.

In the second chapter (26-53), Bauer clarifies his understanding of the term 'cultural ambiguity', and introduces such terms as 'ambiguity tolerance', 'ambiguity anxiety', 'crisis of ambiguity' and 'domesticated ambiguity', all of which are essential to his argumentation. I will analyze this core chapter below in my critical assessment.

The third chapter (54-114) discusses the traditional field of *qiraʾāt* (i.e. the various canonical readings of the Quranic text) as a telling example for the capacity of post-formative Islamic culture to cope with ambiguity. Therefore, Bauer summarizes the thinking of Ibn al-Jazarī (751-833/1350-1429) on *qiraʾāt* and shows how this intellectual did not only accept the polyvalence of the Quranic text, but even regarded it as a particular richness that denotes God's presence therein. For al-Jazarī, multiplicity is a divine grace ("Vielfalt als Gnade," 86-94). Bauer then contrasts al-Jazarī's theories with those of the Wahhābī scholar, Ibn al-ʿUthaymīn (d. 2001), who pleaded for a unique, unified reading of the Qurʾān. Bauer further discusses the ideas of the liberal litterateur Tāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973) and those the of the Islamist al-Mawdūdī (1903-1973). According to Bauer, all three modern thinkers favored the idea of a unique, unambiguous reading of texts: in spite of their differing political ideas, they shared a common, modern and 'ambiguity-intolerant' attitude. As we will see, this will be a central argument in Bauer's thinking: modern liberal Islam and contemporaneous fundamentalist Islam are both equivalent offshoots of European modernity, and both are basically 'ambiguity-intolerant' (cf. also his schema, 60). In contrast, post-formative Islam was 'ambiguity-tolerant'

and parallels the postmodern world-view insofar that it emphasizes a multi-perspective idea of reality (112-114).

The fourth chapter (115-142) treats the traditional field of *tafsīr* (Quranic exegesis). As in the third chapter, Bauer contrasts the ideas of a post-formative, 'ambiguity-tolerant thinker', in this case, al-Māwardī (364-450/974-1058), who defended the richness of multiple interpretations of the Qurʾān, with those of a modern, 'ambiguity intolerant' one, the aforementioned Wahhābī writer, Ibn al-ʿUthaymīn. In a second section of the chapter, he argues again an excessive 'theologization' of Islam ("Theologisierung des Islams," 131-142). According to Bauer, Orientalist scholars have paid too much attention to the religious and theology-based aspects of Islamic culture, to the degree that they have failed to understand Islam's inherent 'ambiguity tolerance'. To illustrate his argument, he first discusses the term of *ʿilm ẓannī* (hypothetical truth) as used by jurists (whom he regards as the "archetypes of scholars," 133), a notion that contrasts the concept of *ʿilm qaṭʿī* (absolute truth) as used by the *kalām* theologians, which ultimately derives from logical argumentation. As a second example, Bauer refers to the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qurʾān (*iʿdjāz al-Qurʾān*), often misunderstood as untranslatability (in reality, it refers to the impossibility to capture the inapprehensible divine meaning of the Qurʾān), and summarizes its classical formulation by al-Zamakhsharī (467-538/1075-1144).

In the fifth chapter (143-192), Bauer turns his view to the traditional field of hadith studies. Therefore, he outlines the principles established by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (773-852/1372-1449), who classified prophetical hadith into different categories of reliability, within a scale of increasing plausibility, but excluding the possibility of absolute certainty. This peculiar understanding of truth leads Bauer to further elaborate the idea of the scholarly *ikhtilāf* (conflicting juridical opinions). Bauer notably refers here to the thinking of Abū al-Qāsim Ibn al-Juzayy al-Kalbī (693-741/1294-1340), that is based on the assumption that scholars only possess the capacity of hypothetical truth (*ʿilm ẓannī,* see chapter 3), what would explain the coexistence of diverse but still valid opinions. However, in order to reduce and 'domesticate' (*zähmen*) the resulting cultural ambiguity, Islam has developed the notion of the four law schools. In contrast, and in accordance with their characteristic 'ambiguity intolerant' world-view, the modern Wahhābī Ibn al-ʿUthaymīn and other contemporaneous fundamentalists and salafists oppose the idea of the diversity of law schools (*lā madhhabīya*).

The sixth chapter (192-223) is devoted to a more general theme: the relationship between the secular and religious spheres in Islamic culture. Bauer refers to the widely-held idea (192) that Islam does not differentiate between the two spheres, since religion pervades all aspects of life. As the differentiation between these sectors is considered a crucial asset of modernity (this common idea ultimately goes back to Luhmann's system theory), its absence would be a feature of Islam's backwardness. In the following, Bauer battles vehemently against this supposedly fatal 'Islamization of Islam' (*Islamisierung des Islams*) and points to several 'religion-free zones' (*religionsfreie Zonen*) in Islam that would

indicate the successful differentiation of diverse societal systems in premodern Islam; for instance, he enumerates *fiqh*, sufism, theology and hadith. In his argumentation, Bauer then opposes the views of several prestigious scholars in Islamic studies that allegedly have been engaged in this process of the 'Islamization of Islam', Gustav von Grunebaum, Martin Plessner, and Ignaz Goldziher. He finally points to the pervasive interpretation scheme in modern media that reduces all phenomena in the Middle East to its 'Islamic dimension'.

Bauer dedicates the seventh chapter (224-267) to the role of ambiguity in rhetoric and poetry. One of the most brilliant chapters of the book, it reminds one that these are Bauer's chief areas of expertise. He reconstructs the emergence of Classical Arabic as a key cultural element in the first centuries of Islam, a process which gave way to sophisticated theories in grammar, lexicography, linguistic theories, rhetoric and philology. According to Bauer, this centrality of language fostered the fascination for polysemy and opened the way to the playful sides of ambiguity. He then comments on such frequent Arabic literary tropes and genres as *iqtibās*, *muʿāraḍa*, *naqāʾid, thawriya* and *badīʿiyya*, all of which evidence this broad attitude, and whose use also served as training in 'ambiguity tolerance' ("Ambiguitätstraining," 253-267). Bauer contrasts these currents of thought with the bias against rhetoric in modern Western scholarship (as exemplified, for example, by the Orientalist H.L. Fleischer), rooted as it was in Romantic ideas of veracity and a resistance to ornate style and semantic ambiguity.

The eighth chapter (268-312) addresses the radical changes that, according to Bauer, the Islamic understanding of sexuality has undergone since the nineteenth century (in particular as regards male homosexuality). Until then, sexuality was seen as something natural and enjoyable, as long as it took place within Islamic legality (i.e., matrimony), since Islam does not hold to the idea of original sin. Furthermore, pre-modern Near Eastern societies did not feel the need to differentiate between (male) love and friendship. In contrast, present Islamic attitudes towards sexuality are clearly prudish, misogynist and homophobic. As in the previous chapters, Bauer attributes these transformations to the impact of Western ideas: the 'ambiguity-intolerant' sexuality discourse of the West that emerged in the nineteenth century (rooted in pre-modern Christian hostility to the body) introduced an essentialized 'hetero-homo-binarity.' Homosexuality became an unnatural deviation and perversion. In addition, the Western 'obsession with truth' (*Wahrheitsobsession*) would have forced individuals to 'confess' (*bekennen*) their sexual orientation and to live 'truly' according to it. His argumentation is widely based on the theories formulated by Foucault and Muchembled about the European history of sexuality. Finally, this peculiar 'western' understanding of sexuality was fatally combined with the need to universalize European concepts and to colonize, so that the peculiar discourse of sexuality was imposed on the allegedly 'decadent' and 'degenerated' Islam.

The ninth chapter (312-375) elaborates on the idea that the West has sought to universalize its peculiar worldview. It seeks to monopolize dominating discourses,

an attitude that stands in contrast to the open attitude of the pre-modern Islamic Orient, a period that was characterized by an awareness that there were multiple perspectives on reality and a general acceptance of plurality. According to Bauer, post-formative Islam would feature a 'relaxed view on the world' (*gelassener Blick auf die Welt*). Bauer then discusses several political discourses in Islam and argues in favor of a greater consideration of textual genres, such as panegyric poetry, mirror of princes and *fiqh* literature, that all convey a secular view on politics. In a second part (343-375), he analyses the term Arabic *gharīb* ('foreigner, stranger') and argues that its meaning does not denote any xenophobic dimension. The West, in contrast, understands the semantic equivalents of *gharīb* in an objectivizing, discriminating way, denoting a characteristic 'ambiguity anxiety', and so feels a need to convert and assimilate the 'foreigner' in order to disambiguate his ambiguous status.

The tenth chapter (376-405) functions in part as a conclusion. In it Bauer develops his thesis of an 'ambiguity-tolerant' and multi-perspective pre-modern Islam that only changed after the confrontation with the 'ambiguity-intolerant' West. Bauer deals with abstract philosophical ideas and concepts that, according to his far-reaching argumentation, are radically different in the West and pre-modern Islam. Islam pursued a skeptical world-view that accepted the human limits of cognition, as seen in the work of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543-606/1149-1209), and even developed, in the ideas of Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī (422-466/1031-1074), a theory of non-understanding. The West, for its part, adhered, after Descartes, to an anti-humanist, logistic philosophy that ultimately aims to eradicate any ambivalence and ambiguity. Modern fundamentalist and liberal Islam have both incorporated this originally Western perception of reality that only allows for one unique truth. It is a paradox that the post-modernist West, in the meanwhile, has abandoned these attitudes for an open, humanistic and tolerant philosophy, whereas Islam is still 'stuck' in monochrome modernity.

As illustrated above, Bauer pursues three main goals: the introduction of a new analytic tool to explain cultural changes ('cultural ambiguity'); second, its application to Islamic history and culture, and third, to propose thereby a new overriding narrative of Islamic history. What are the main constituents of this new term as proposed by Bauer?

In its original context, the term *ambiguity* is used in the field of semantics and linguistics to denominate the inherent capacity of utterances, words and other symbols to carry multiple meanings, i.e., semantic polyvalence. If semantic ambiguity goes too far and produces misunderstandings, it loses efficacy. But ambiguity is also a necessary quality of language, since it provides the appropriate flexibility for its social use. Ambiguity can also be a quality of social acts, insofar as they might be socially interpreted (i.e., 'read') and valued in multiple and conflicting ways. In this case, ambiguity tends to be a problem and becomes a source of anxiety: the ability of an individual to cope with this ambiguity, and manage it in a positive way, is commonly seen as part of his personal capacity of solving conflicts. Psychology, since the 1950's, has investigated the degree of

'ambiguity tolerance' as a personality trait; this was related to the study of the so-called 'authoritarian personality' and its hypothetical connection to fascism and racism.

Bauer proposes now to broaden the term's application, by defining 'ambiguity tolerance' as a basic trait of whole cultures and societies. Such a qualitative leap from individual psychology to collective psychology, and then to cultural studies is risky, but can also be very inspiring and might open the path to new perspectives. A telling example is the remarkable career of the term 'identity', which in its origin was only used in psychology and philosophy, but has come to be used in the last decades mainly in the sense of collective identity or identities (understood variously as cultural, religious or ethnic). A similar case is that of 'memory' (as in 'collective' or 'cultural memory'). From this perspective, the introduction of the term 'cultural ambiguity' in Cultural Studies promises to open a fruitful new field of research.

An essential weakness of this kind of ambitious, broad, and comparative approach, however, is that it relies on generalizations, simplifications and a selective evidence base that can be challenged from many perspectives. Bauer posits a dichotomy between an 'ambiguity-tolerant' pre-modern Islam and an 'ambiguity-intolerant' West. Unfortunately, aside from being an undue simplification on both sides, based on a debatable selection of sources, he fails to adequately explain why and how this basic difference emerged, creating in the process a radical contrast between two neighboring and entangled cultures, both equally offshoots of Late Antiquity (and ultimately of Aristotelian epistemology). It also remains unclear why it was so easy for the West to impose its unitary world-view and eradicate successfully pre-modern, 'ambiguity-tolerant' Islam.

A further point is that Bauer's portrayal of pre-modern Islam occasionally suggests that this period was almost post-modern, which is, of course, a *contradictio in adjecto* (e.g., 113 "Konzeption [...] ist unverkennbar *postmodern*"), since post-modernity presupposes modernity by its very essence. Furthermore, Bauer has to rely on previous generalizing, selective and often outdated studies that provide a unidimensional view on many phenomena. This applies, in particular, to his portrayal of Western sexuality and his understanding of homosexuality (based on Foucault and Muchembled), as well as that of modern European philosophy (here Bauer relies mostly on the antilogicist and postmodernist Stephen Toulmin and his polemics against analytical philosophy, which would explain the almost complete omission of German idealism in Bauer's book). It is also curious that Bauer, in his enthusiasm for the blessings of ambiguity, refers to the argumentation of the sociologist D.N. Levine[4], who actually condemned ambiguity as an essential trait of sharply stratified societies in which elites used secrecy to maintain their privileged status.

In contrast to Edward Said, whose expertise was in English and French literature – Said's ignorance of the academic field of Oriental Studies has always been a crucial argument against his theories - Bauer is an established scholar in the field. A widely-acknowledged expert

4. *The flight from Ambiguity.Essays in Social and Cultural Theory*. Chicago 1985.

in Classical Arabic poetry, Arabic Rhetoric and Mamluk literature, he is a professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies (University of Münster). Thus, Bauer's scholarly knowledge of Islamic culture is beyond doubt (particularly in the field of Arabic literature). His selection of sources is at times puzzling; he omits the thinker and fundamentalist *ante litteram,* Ibn Ṭaymiyya (661-728/1263-1328), and focuses almost exclusively on the Mamluk and Ayyūbid periods. (For other questionable omissions, see the review by Irene Schneider).[5]

Another point concerns his understanding of sex, gender and sexuality in pre-modern Islam, which is debatable;[6] and Bauer's almost complete neglect of female sexuality and gender in a chapter addressing sexuality in Islam is also hardly comprehensible. Bauer might be said to share a certain lack of balance with Edward Said, though in his case regarding "the West," about which his sweeping comments are occasionally superficial and selective. His expertise in Arabic and Islamic studies, however, is on display throughout. Bauer's treatment of Arabic literature, for example, offers inspired insights into its playful aesthetics, and his introduction to important Muslim thinkers from the rather unknown post-formative period are very meritorious, readable and highly interesting.

Bauer's book is overall a commendable work. It suggests the possibility of writing an alternative history of Islam that would focus on the post-formative or Middle period and its many original if far less known thinkers. One hopes that the book will also remind European scholars that the modern roots of Islamic fundamentalism are by no means 'medieval'. It is also remarkable that an Arabist has written a book of such wide cultural scope. Even if some of Bauer's assumptions and conclusions might be debatable, it is very exciting to think about scholars in 'European' and 'Western' studies henceforth discussing questions of Islamic law, hadith, Qurʾān and Arabic literature as topics that might be relevant to them and to cultural studies in general.

5. See note 3 above.

6. See in particular Sara Omar's study "From Semantics to Normative Law: Perceptions of *Liwāṭ* (Sodomy) and *Siḥāq* (Tribadism) in Islamic Jurisprudence (8th to 15th century C.E.)," *Islamic Law and Society* 19 (2012), 222-256..