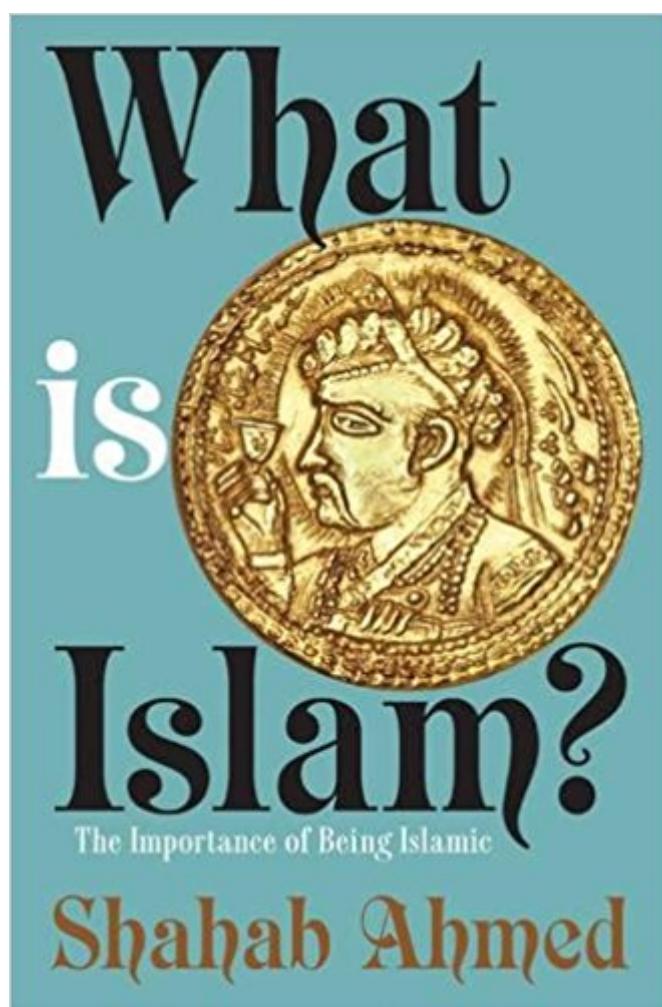


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# What Is Islam?: The Importance Of Being Islamic



## Synopsis

What is Islam? How do we grasp a human and historical phenomenon characterized by such variety and contradiction? What is "Islamic" about Islamic philosophy or Islamic art? Should we speak of Islam or of islams? Should we distinguish the Islamic (the religious) from the Islamicate (the cultural)? Or should we abandon "Islamic" altogether as an analytical term? In *What Is Islam?*, Shahab Ahmed presents a bold new conceptualization of Islam that challenges dominant understandings grounded in the categories of "religion" and "culture" or those that privilege law and scripture. He argues that these modes of thinking obstruct us from understanding Islam, distorting it, diminishing it, and rendering it incoherent. *What Is Islam?* formulates a new conceptual language for analyzing Islam. It presents a new paradigm of how Muslims have historically understood divine revelation • one that enables us to understand how and why Muslims through history have embraced values such as exploration, ambiguity, aestheticization, polyvalence, and relativism, as well as practices such as figural art, music, and even wine drinking as Islamic. It also puts forward a new understanding of the historical constitution of Islamic law and its relationship to philosophical ethics and political theory. A book that is certain to provoke debate and significantly alter our understanding of Islam, *What Is Islam?* reveals how Muslims have historically conceived of and lived with Islam as norms and truths that are at once contradictory yet coherent.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2016 Best First Book in the History of Religions, American Academy of ReligionOne of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2016"Anyone interested in exploring the intricacies and complexities of Islam as a religion, philosophical system and social text should study the new

bookWhat Is Islam?â | [A] perfect antidote to our present discourse."--Hussein Ibish, New York Times"A fascinating, often difficult, but ultimately rewarding study. Embracing and indeed celebrating what is most creative and explorative in Islam, Ahmed is sick of people reducing the religion to nothing more than a mess of prohibitions and restrictions."--Thomas Small, Times Literary Supplement"One can't but be impressed by the grandeur of Ahmed's vision."--Malise Ruthven, London Review of Books"This is an enduring and timely work well worth the effort for those interested in discerning the essence of Islam beyond the seeming paradoxes of its own representations."--Publisher's Weekly"A bold new conceptualisation of Islam that reflects its contradictions and rich diversity."--Bookseller Buyer's Guide"[A] major new study â | a strange and brilliant work, encyclopedic in vision and tautly argued in the manner of a logical proof, yet pervaded by the urgency of a political manifesto."--The Nation"We can be grateful â | that Ahmed managed to complete this extraordinary work. Scholars from east and west will be under his influence for years to come."--Sameer Rahim, Prospect"In this monumental work, the late Shahab Ahmed sought new answers to important questions: How does one understand what Islam is? How does one study it meaningfully? . . . This volume will be central to the study of Islam and of religion more broadly for the foreseeable future."--Choice"Remarkable."--Damian Howard, The Tablet"If the task sounds monumental, Ahmedâ ™s staggering erudition and range has more than equipped him for the challenge. . . . To call the book ambitious is an understatement."--Alireza Doostdar, Shiâ Studies Review

"Not merely field changing, but the boldest and best thing I have read in any field in years."--Noah Feldman, Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law, Harvard Law School"This book seeks to offer nothing short of a new way of looking at Islam, and it succeeds admirably at so doingâ |. I know of no book on the question of how to approach Islam that comes close to this study in its learning, breadth, and sophistication. It should be read not only by students and scholars of Islam, but by all those interested in the broad questions about conceptualizing religion, culture, and history that it raises."--Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Princeton University"Strikingly original, wide-ranging in its engagement, subtle in its interpretations, and hard-hitting in its conclusions, this book will certainly provoke debate for a number of years. Ahmed's assertions are provocative, his analysis is sharp, and his own solution is both strong and creative. The book lays out a new and capacious basis for thinking about an Islamic humanism. It reconstructs basic scholarly paradigms, ranges across all fields of the Islamic humanities--literature, history, philosophy, art, music, et cetera--and will create potentials for new streams of scholarship in all these fields."--Engseng Ho, Professor of Cultural

Anthropology and Professor of History, Duke University "Lucid and compelling, beautifully constructed and powerful, important and brave. What Shahab Ahmed has accomplished in this book is to create a postcolonial ontology of Islam, one that provincializes the Euro-American categories of analysis that up to now have been applied to Islam, both by Western scholars as well as by scholars from the Muslim world who have appropriated these categories."--Robert Wisnovsky, James McGill Professor of Islamic Philosophy, McGill University

This book provides an explanation of what Islam really is, as it is lived and understood by Moslems all over the world. There is much more to it than Shari'a law and the Qur'an. It is not a light read, but it is well worth the effort. It is the most important book I have read in a long time.

This could have been condensed down to half the length, there is a lot of repetition that could have been avoided with better editorial direction. As the author has passed, may God bless his soul, perhaps he would have parsed down if given the time. Regardless, this is a unique contribution to understanding the various lenses with which we view Islam, hence "What is Islam?" With modern Islam cut off from past empires-polities that often shaped the cultural ethos of Islamic civilization, and with political fervor coloring revivalist Islamic movements, Islam has increasingly been identified as that which the traditionalist-jurist camp proclaimed it to be. This book attempts to show that there were other competing forms of self identity within Islam, often at odds with the jurist camp. This was seen to the degree that the most influential ruler of his time (on the cover) could mint coins in his name while holding a wine cup. That is the essence of this book, unpacking what else could give meaning and identity in Islam if not limited to the legalists.

The author give a good background and explaination why we can expect muslim people to take control over their own destiny. I really enjoyed reading the book and felt happy to see good signs of forces within the muslim word that can phase out militants and dictators. It is very sad the author is dead and will not experience this development in the physical world.

Very excellent coverage of the material, a full consideration of the whole subject!

An important read for anyone interested in the complexities of Islam, past and present.

Excellent. A must read.

Must read.

This book is of fundamental importance for anyone engaged in the study of Islam. It serves to situate the many ways in which all aspects of Islam's vast intellectual tradition, law, theology, philosophy, Sufism, poetry, etc., can be understood in relation to one another and how they can all be incorporated into answering the question, "What is Islam?" I am particularly struck with the ingenious manner in which the author deals with the question of hermeneutics and demonstrates how so many facets of classical Islamic civilization can and must be understood as hermeneutics even when they are not officially categorized in that manner. More importantly, he demonstrates how elements like Persian poetry actually were incorporated as part of the understanding of both what it was to be a Muslim and of the Quran. One hopes that everyone who wants to say something about Islam in public discourse will take the time to read this book. It will greatly expand everyone's understanding of what Islamic civilization has traditionally encompassed. I have deducted one star because the style can be a quite meandering at times and I find the constant use of italics to emphasize a point somewhat distracting. In good writing, strength of discourse makes the point, not italics. Shahab Ahmed, may he rest in peace, had a brilliant mind, but did need a brilliant copy editor. He has left us an exceptional treatise that is sure to influence the field in many ways for years to come.

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