

Book Review

Irfan Ahmad, *Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to Marketplace*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2018), Rs. 1195, xxv +270, Hbk, (ISBN 0 19 948759 6)

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The larger project that Ahmad has undertaken in this book is to question the dominant Eurocentric discourse that – Islam is a religion with an absence for the space of critique. He argues that in the twentieth century there has been a cold war between Islam and the West, underlined by the discourse of Enlightenment. The idea of Enlightenment, as contented by Ahmad is a manifested “self-appreciation” and did not necessarily mean a break from the earlier Christian tradition; but rather it was the project of putting ‘progressive’ Protestantism forward to immune the Christian world from any sort of critique. Thus, enlightenment becomes for the author an ethnic project of the German and the French.

On this backdrop Ahmad argues that it is the larger politics of enlightenment that projects Islam as a religion without the scope of any critique. In this process, he gives a substantial account of western literature which talks about Islam and it’s orthodoxy including Immanuel Kant. But for Ahmad, the greatest inability of this prevailing dominant theoretical framework is connected to Enlightenment legacy which talk about critique of religion other than Christianity. Rather than putting Islam and critique as mutually exclusive domain, he talks about Islam as a permanent critique in itself. He builds on Talal Asad’s conceptualization of Islam as a discursive tradition, and shows that “immanent critique” has always been present in Islamic history and culture.

This Eurocentric project alleges non-Christian religion of lacking a critique within their own domain. They perceive Protestantism as already

something with in-built critique and hence rational. Ahmad deals with the ideas of prominent thinker of political Islam; Abdul Ala Maududi and his lesser known, diverse critiques. Based on critique on and by Maududi, Ahmad argues that critique in different form and extent has always been an essential part of Islamic tradition.

Emphasizing on in-depth historical analysis, Ahmad argues that the issue of 'continuity and break' has a prominent role in our understanding of what we call Islam today or Islamic civilization or culture. Here he brings the methodological distinction of sociologist / anthropologist and that of orientalist/historian. For Ahmad, the latter uses the historical continuity in their analysis whereas the former often write in terms of a break with the past (pp.91-92). He is of the opinion that a proper understanding of what we call Islam today is not possible without a thorough engagement with the ancient Islamic political thought and history. In the above context Ahmad emphasizes the need for an "epistemic continuity between the pre-colonial and contemporary periods in the Islamic world" (pp.92-93).

Ahmad further elaborates on Islam through a critical engagement with the writings of Maulana Maududi (the founder of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, usually referred as Jamaat). Ahmad explores those areas of Maududi's writings - on the critic on Islam. Simultaneously dealing with the writings of different scholars – both trained in modern western education and Islamic theology – their critical responses to Maududi and his counter response to them. The critiques of Maududi are either sympathizers of Jamaat with significant difference or ex-Jamaat supporters. The main criticism that critique brought against Maududi was that Maududi's idea of Islam deviates from universal humanistic view, by ethicizing Islam only to Muslims. Also significant critiques of Maududi argue that for them Islam with a sense of devotion to Allah might be a matter of private faith; by not subscribing to Maudud's political Islam or kingdom of Allah. By referring to various literatures and ethnographic accounts connected to *Darul Uloom* in Deoband and other Islamic institutions in North India, the larger project that Ahmad pursues is - to underline that critique within and from Islam has always been part of Islamic tradition.

For this purpose he reflects critically on his ethnographic engagements in Aligarh by meeting different people who had diverse opinion on Maududi; some of them are connected to Jamaat and some are not. Ahmad brings the debate as what is it that constitutes the basis of something to be categorized as a specific work of critique? Also in alternative way, what are the basic criteria or parameters that pre-suppose something to be called as critique? To engage with this query he brings Maududi in and argues that - the answer has to begin from engaging with Quran and Sunna. He writes that "The Legitimacy, desirability, motive, function, mode and goal of critique ought to speak to the yardstick of truth, which is ultimately sharia. And in Sharia no human is above critique" (pp.84). Ahmad refers to one of the instances of Quran where Prophet Musa goes on to critique Khizr related to some issue of religious discursive practices. Forms of critique within Islam not only continued but also flourished. Ahmad says that Maududi wondered if there was a time when critique had been considered illegitimate (pp.85-86).

He also debates an interesting and often controversial phenomenon - that is - Islam and the position on women. Ahmad refers to a set of literature as a critique of Maududi who viewed women's participation outside the house and in politics undesirable. But at the same time, Ahmad refers to vast range of literature by Islamic scholars who responded to Maududi and argued for alternative interpretation of Quran and Hadith. Basically before beginning to engage with the ideas of Maududi and his critique, Ahmad puts forward an alternative genealogy of critique which is not informed by Eurocentric notion about Islam and non-Christian world. He criticizes the traditional approach on Anthropology where it doesn't reflect much on the historical ruptures. For Ahmad, to understand the present day Islam, one needs to focus on the historical continuity that conventional Anthropologist ignores. In this context, Ahmad particularly reflects on the critique of Maududi by his followers on his "neopatriarchate" ideas especially related to women. Their critic actually exposes the missing part of what modernist critic couldn't talk about Islam and Women. Ahmad argues that it is not essentially Islam but

the interpretation of the person and the historical-political context that legitimizes patriarchy (pp.156).

From a methodological point of view this book makes a significant intervention in the understanding of sociology or social anthropology. Ahmad moves beyond the notion of traditional Anthropology by referring to substantial number of literary and poetry pieces. By critiquing this conventional approach, Ahmad argues that many actually fails to recognize that it is actually a repetition of the Enlightenment position. By referring to Kant, Ahmed writes “In Anthropology, Kant (2006) [1798] wrote that plays, novels and other literary works are not actually based on truth but only on invention” (pp.180). He also interestingly gives emphasis to the critique in mundane form or notion of critique by ordinary people.

From a theoretical point of view, the study can be located within the larger domain of post-colonial scholarship and Asadian framework of Anthropology of Islam. He extends the arguments put forward by Said about Eurocentric notion of the world. Taking that framework, bringing religion into the subject matter of inquiry, Ahmad forwards a critic of Western enlightenment project. While engaging with the works of Maududi, he refers to Talal Asad – for a discursive framework to establish an anthropology of Islam. Extending the idea of Asad, Ahmad considers this discursive tradition within Islam and engages with the idea of critique within it.