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**A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam**, by Thomas Bauer (translated by Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall), 2021, 336 pp., £28.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780231170659

*A Culture of Ambiguity* is one of several books authored by Thomas Bauer, professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Münster, which contributed to him being awarded Germany's prestigious Leibniz Prize in 2013. While it has only recently been translated into English, its original German version was written ten years prior with some suggesting it may be as influential as Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>1</sup>. While Bauer demonstrates his expertise in language and texts, he covers a vast spectrum of fields including linguistics, theology, scriptural analysis, and sociology to outline his argument that Islam, at least historically, can be described as a culture of ambiguity.

In the Introduction and Chapter 1 (Cultural Ambiguity), Bauer sets out his thesis that Islamic history was characterised by an acceptance of ambiguity and contradiction, in contrast to the modern West which opposes ambiguity, following its "obsession with truth" (p.213). While the West seeks to eradicate ambiguity, the historical Islamic tradition has been content with maintaining but "domesticating" ambiguity. The influence of the West on Islam – in part due to colonialism – has meant, however, that this "tolerance" of ambiguity has been stifled in the contemporary period, bringing "considerable devastation to the Islamic world" (p.16).

It is worth elaborating on Bauer's concept of "cultural ambiguity" which he outlines in depth in Chapter 1. Bauer defines it as follows:

"We may talk of the phenomenon of cultural ambiguity if, over a period of time, two contrary, or at least competing, clearly differing meanings are associated with one and the same term, act or object; or if a social group draws on contrary or strongly differing discourses for attributions of meaning to various realms of human life; or if one group simultaneously accepts different interpretations of a phenomenon, all of them entitled to equal validity." (p.10)

Bauer emphasises that such contrary meanings, must be held by the *same* group of people at the *same* time. If contrary meanings are held by different segments of a society it is "only a case of competing norms" and not ambiguity. Bauer gives the example of a society which seeks medical treatment from "magical healers" and "trained physicians". If both types of treatment are sought by the same people simultaneously, this is cultural ambiguity. If different groups only validate one treatment, this would be classed as competing norms (p.10). While Bauer recognises that "ambiguity" has largely been applied matters of language, he uses it in a much broader sense including "both language and nonlinguistic acts" (p.9). This is conveyed by his definition, introductory example, and throughout the following chapters.

The remainder of Bauer's volume provides case examples illustrating his argument, followed by a closing discussion in Chapter 9. Chapters 2-4 focus on religious texts. Chapter 2 outlines

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Toral-Niehoff, Review of *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, by Thomas Bauer, *Al-'Uşūr al-Wuṣṭā: The Journal of Middle East Medievalists*, no. 24 (2016): 187–93.

the different ways of reciting and pronouncing the Quran that were prominent during classical Islam, but argues they have been side-lined more recently in favour of one singular reading. Chapter 3 explores Quranic interpretation, similarly arguing that a diversity of interpretations has been promoted throughout Islamic history though in this case, this diversity seems to have been maintained up until now. This is different to Western Christian usage of the Bible where standardized translations are consulted, which Bauer provides as evidence for his assertion that Western cultures are less embracing of ambiguity. Chapter 4 focuses on the history of hadith compilations and the concept of *ikhtilaf* (difference of opinion) in Islamic law. Bauer argues that while this difference in legal opinion was encouraged previously, modern Salafis reject *ikhtilaf* and the four schools of thought in *fiqh*, something which is “a reaction to the demand of the modern West to achieve ideological unambiguity” (p.128).

Chapter 5 engages with Western perceptions of Islam, arguing that much of Islamic culture – including art and medicine – has been “Islamized”, or made religious, unjustifiably. Bauer posits that there were secular *and* religious discourses within Islamic societies that were debated in the past, but the modern assumption that everything Muslims did was religious, obscures these negotiations and ambiguities present in the classical Islamic tradition. Chapter 6 discusses the ambiguity of language, particularly within Islamic literature and poetry, arguing that while the West considered such literary ambiguity a “scholastic nuisance” (p.181), it served as a “training in ambiguity” (p.182) for those engaging with the texts. Chapter 7, explores sexual desire which Bauer asserts has long been engaged with in an ambiguous way in Islamic contexts. The West, conversely, has tried to eliminate the ambiguity of sex resulting in the strict categorisations of sexuality in the modern day.

The final case study in Chapter 8 discusses issues of religious and cultural plurality that were widespread in Islamic history, but have diminished in the current period. Bauer proposes that the “universalising ambitions” (p.215) of Western colonialism have influenced modern-day Islamic thought, arguing that the contemporary “outbreak of religiously motivated violence must instead be seen in connection with a loss of tolerance for ambiguity” (p.216). This provocative assertion, though well-reasoned, does not engage with debates by scholars of religious violence on the significance (or rather lack thereof) of ideology and belief.<sup>2</sup>

Those familiar with Shahab Ahmed’s *What is Islam?*<sup>3</sup> may see clear parallels with Bauer’s book, since Ahmed outlines the apparent contradictions amongst Muslim notions of what is deemed ‘Islamic’<sup>4</sup>. While Bauer acknowledges Ahmed’s work (written after Bauer’s German monograph) in the foreword to the translation, he has not updated his manuscript to engage with it (p.xii). A key divergence between the authors emerges in Bauer’s Chapter 5. Bauer asserts that “to talk of an “Islamic wine goblet” is as reasonable as to talk of “Christian adultery”” drawing a distinction between religious and secular spheres in Islamic

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Francis, “Radical ideology isn’t what make extremists turn violent”, *The Conversation*, May 22, 2014, <https://theconversation.com/radical-ideology-isnt-what-makes-extremists-turn-violent-27006>; William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed refers to a similar concept of “perplexity” or “*hayrat*” as a “normative Islamic value”; Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 278.

history (p.130). Ahmed, on the other hand, discusses the wine jug owned by Mughal Emperor Jahangir which is inscribed with God's name, arguing that "clearly, for Jahāngīr, his wine-cup cohered with his conceptualization of what is Islam"<sup>5</sup>. Ahmed, unlike Bauer, does not seem to draw such a firm distinction between 'Islamic' and 'secular', potentially allowing more space for unorthodox practices to be interpreted as part of an Islamic tradition. The potential utility of Bauer and Ahmed's competing ideas remains to be explored in further research.

*A Culture of Ambiguity* presents a compelling thesis about historical and contemporary Islam which is well-situated in an Islamic religious framework demonstrated by the extensiveness of the topics explored in the book; as described by some, it attempts to "understand Islam on its own terms"<sup>6</sup>. Some may argue, contrary to Bauer's contention, that Islamic expressions of ambiguity are not completely lost in the contemporary period. However, Bauer notes that he limits his study of modern Islam to "the Salafist movements" and "the so-called reformists" which he sees as more prominent currently than "representatives of traditional Islam" (p.8). Later chapters also highlight aspects of Islamic culture – such as Quranic interpretation (Chapter 3) – which are still broadly tolerant of ambiguity. Nonetheless, there are ample opportunities for other academics to explore Muslim attitudes towards ambiguity in the present day. This book then, is an invaluable piece of scholarship for academics researching Muslims in relation to linguistics, cultural studies, social studies, theology, textual studies and political sciences. Beyond this, Bauer's theory of "cultural ambiguity" has the flexibility and comprehensiveness to be applied to the study of other religious or non-religious cultures. I would suggest even, that the work has the potential to sit alongside some of the great works of social theory – such as Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and Ambivalence* to which Bauer refers – should it be applied more broadly to the study of cultures.

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Griffel, "Contradictions and Lots of Ambiguity: Two New Perspectives on Premodern (and Postclassical) Islamic Societies," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1-21.