

## In Memoriam



SHAHAB AHMED  
(1966-2015)

When I arrived at Harvard as a doctoral student in Islamic studies in 2005, the then-chair of my department, in an attempt to orient me, mentioned a certain Shahab Ahmed. He had been offered a faculty position, but was spending the year at Princeton completing a post-doctoral fellowship. I asked: “What does he specialize in?” He replied: “Everything.” When I met Shahab the following fall at a department cocktail party, he approached me and said, “I read your file. I should be your supervisor.” I asked: “What do you specialize in?” “Everything,” he replied.

Shahab became my co-advisor, along with Leila Ahmed, whom he always respected and admired. The greatest period of my intellectual growth began.

Over time I would come to realize that Shahab’s statement that he specialized in “everything” was not *braggadocio*. Less a comment of what he had achieved, it was an indication of his impeccable standards and sense of what was possible for a scholar to attain. It will perhaps not surprise the reader to learn that his graduate students could find this attitude challenging. It simply was not acceptable to Shahab not to know something, though

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(Photo courtesy of Nora Lessersohn, Harvard University.)

it would also excite him when he did not. He would be sure to look into whatever lapse in knowledge had emerged, and he would bring it up the next time you saw him. His obsessiveness, a stunning intellectual strength, was difficult on him as a person.

Shahab once asked me to articulate exactly why I was pursuing a Ph.D. in Islamic studies. After giving it some thought, I replied, "If it is not to make positive change, I don't see the point." He seemed satisfied with this answer and a touch surprised. He told me that, for his part, it was Fazlur Rahman's work that inspired him to become a scholar of Islamic Studies. "Most doctoral students start out as reformers," he once reflected, an insight I have never forgotten for its simple truth. How different a place so many of us land after years of rigorous study. He went on to become, in my view, one of the best Islamicists in the world. He perhaps felt that the journey had required him to abandon the goal of reform, though I personally do not think he ever completely did.

I was in awe of Shahab for many years. I had never met anyone so intellectually dedicated, exacting, exciting, relentless, unsatisfied with cutting the slightest corner, at once ruthlessly self-critical and self-aggrandizing, deeply kind and, at times, cruel. His eyes were always lively and curious, even when he was depressed or in physical pain, which he often was. I also never worked harder for anyone in my life than I did for Shahab. Nearly every interaction expanded me as a scholar. He profoundly changed my world-view.

Shahab and I had much in common. We both came from Muslim backgrounds, but were both intellectually and

sociologically westernized. He, having had a more dizzyingly cosmopolitan childhood, struggled with his rootlessness and pan-culturalism more than I did. We shared a sense of wanting to redeem the past and change the future of the Islamic world. We had hundreds of conversations about how and why to do this. In one

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particularly memorable exchange, we discussed the possibility of simply erasing all of Islamic history and starting, as he put it, at "year zero." This nuclear option seemed appealing on days when there was another terrorist bombing in Pakistan, his ancestral homeland (along with India), whereupon his father, who lived in Malaysia, would suggest that he delay his next visit. Or on days when one would hear of a retrograde *fatwa*. Or on days of Islamophobic violence in the West.

There were moments in which I would be frustrated with what I saw as the intransigence of the arcane Islamic legal treatises that I was reading for my dissertation. Shahab was not particularly tolerant of such feelings, once snapping, "You need to be a better structural engineer." What did that mean? "You can't dismantle the one pillar that survived colonialism." Rather taken aback at the accusation, I assured Shahab that I was not trying to destroy post-colonial Muslim hope, but that I found many of the texts hopelessly patriarchal and to engage them in arcane detail was to fight an eternally losing battle. Shahab replied: "God is male. Get used to it."

The comment typified Shahab in several respects. Those who have read his peerless, indeed landmark book, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2015) understand that underlying his discerning arguments is a critique of our contemporary tendency to overemphasize the Islamic legal tradition. What did it mean that, in what he coined the “Bengal to Balkans complex” – the regions outside what is typically regarded as the Arab “orthodox” geographical center of Islam – Sufi poetry was written in praise of wine? Or that Islamic legal thinking influenced and was influenced by speculative theology, which often reasoned itself away from literalist strict constructionist legal orthodoxies? Shahab argues that we must expand our idea of Islam to admit the contradictions embedded in its texts and practices. The book, a nimble scholarly offering, surely will engage generations of Islamicists. Shahab would not let me, a graduate student, get away with a critique of Islamic legal fetishism without first mastering it. For this, I thank him.

“God is male.” The Islamic tradition is in part a historicized, secular one with particular foundational features. One of those, for Shahab, was patriarchy. Having engaged Shahab on a range of topics, I can report that, as a person, Shahab saw the problems with patriarchy, and agreed with me that it was as bad for men as it was for women. But, as an intellectual matter, the evidence was clear to him that the Islamic tradition was patriarchal, and to deny this was for him intellectual dishonesty. I understood this and fundamentally agreed. But there was more. Feminist scholarship set Shahab on edge, and he loathed nothing more than to be anxious and uncertain

about any scholarly question. This strain of scholarship threatened him, and, being who he was, he knew that he would eventually have to engage with – indeed, master – an approach with which he was uncomfortable. This unsettled him, but I know he took it to heart. This intellectual integrity was a main reason I respected Shahab.

By the time I learned Shahab was gravely ill, we had not been in close contact for a few years. I was devastated to receive the news. I immediately wrote Shahab a letter, which I hope he received. I continue to find his death unfathomable, and mourn it as a personal loss and a loss to modern scholarship. I am grateful that we have not only *What is Islam?*, but that we will soon have *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2017), his magnum opus on the implications for the development of Islamic orthodoxy of the infamous Satanic Verses incident in early Islam. It is tragic that Shahab will not be here to engage with other scholars on these important works. At the same time, there is a small part of me that is grateful – for his sake – that he will not have to engage with the inevitable critique. It was not his strong suit, and I believe that part of the reason that his work was delayed for publication was that he was acutely aware of what potential critiques could be, and he worked tirelessly to preempt them.

Shahab was, at once, obsessive, difficult, unquestionably brilliant, charming, meticulous, and in possession of a wickedly dry sense of humor. He was an absolute original. I miss him, and owe any of my own high scholarly standards very much to him. As I wrote in my letter, I pledge to do what I can to honor his legacy by sharing

*In Memoriam: Shahab Ahmed*

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and engaging his work with students. I have no doubt that scholars of Islam around the world will do the same, which

I believe is what Shahab wanted more than anything. I pray that my tough teacher, and this great soul, will rest in peace.

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