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The concept of “critique” has been oft-employed to demark the “West” from the “Rest.” For many, it is a fair assumption that only by adopting Western frameworks and concepts can one be truly critical. However, implicit in the name “Critical Muslim Studies” is the idea that perhaps “critique” and to be “critical” are not limited to the ways that are defined by the modern West; that there are, indeed, alternative genealogies of critique. For this reason, Irfan Ahmad’s *Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace* is an important read for all interested in the field of Critical Muslim Studies. The central thesis of the book is that religions, and more specifically Islam, are not just objects to be subjected to critique but rather dynamic agents themselves capable of critique. Ahmad applies this thesis by delineating an alternative genealogy of critique within Islam based on the context of the Indian subcontinent.

Ahmad traces this alternative genealogy of critique, using specifically the subfield of the anthropology of philosophy. Note that the anthropology of philosophy is something very different from philosophical anthropology or even from the philosophy of anthropology. The concept of anthropology of philosophy was first introduced and developed by Kai Kresse in “Philosophising in Mombasa,” where he argues that because philosophy “can be seen as a human practice, responding to the common need for intellectual orientation that is at work in many different social and cultural terms and Context. As such it merits anthropological attention and investigation” (p. 35). Ahmad, for his part, aims to go further than Kresse, whom he critiques as uncritically accepting the Kantian definition of philosophy and not properly treating Kant’s own philosophy as a social practice. As such, Ahmad aims to take the anthropology of philosophy a step further and write an anthropology of the origins of the modern definition of philosophy. It is here that we can see how this book is indebted to the spirit of Talal Asad’s oeuvre, which turns the cold Western anthropological gaze back upon itself in his discussion of various related topics. In this vein, Ahmad starts the body of his book by theorizing the Enlightenment as an ethnic project, which was not a radical break with religion or Christianity but rather “its re-configuration whereby the West/Christianity/Europe enacted an immunity to protect itself from any critique while subjecting all others – ‘the Rest’, as it were – to critique” (p. 33). After this anthropologization of the Enlightenment and exploration of the central role that the Otherization of Islam played in it, he then
traces an alternative genealogy of critique preceding the Enlightenment and beginning in the Axial Age. After setting this crucial ground, he picks up again this alternative genealogy in Muslim South Asia. He illustrates this discussion using the examples of Maududi and his thought and some of his critics who emerged from within the Jamaat movements, particularly, on the issue of women’s rights. Ahmad closes the book in the last chapter by showing critique as a social cultural practice.

In the book’s Prologue, Ahmed writes, “A description that doesn’t sufficiently describe the condition of its own description to outline another description is itself in need of critical description” (p. xiii). True to his word, he not only sufficiently outlines the condition of his own description but does so, I argue, excessively. Instead of exhausting all the possible conditions of his description (an impossible task), the book exhausts its readers. While Ahmad is at his best when he deconstructs Western critiques, thereby demonstrating what it truly means to be critical, there are simply far too many and too wide an array of examples. This blocks the flow within each chapter, as well as from chapter to chapter, as the book simply tries to do too much. Leaving the various critiques of Western defenders of the “Plato to Nato” metanarrative to the side, the book vacillates, in just the South Asian context, between discussions of Shah Valiullah, Ghalib, Maududi, the Jamaat movement and Maududi’s critics, Khan Abdul Ghaaffar and the Khudai Khidmatgar movement and critique as a sociocultural practice.

However for the reader willing to sift through this web and connect the dots, the book has much to offer. Ahmed is convincing in his retheorization of “critique” and the requisites for the criticality of “critiques,” such as critiquing the large framework enabling that critique and universality as emerging “from” humanity rather than “to” humanity. Here, it is worth mentioning that though the way the book demonstrates and frames its theoritization of critique is very much unprecedented, its theoritization of critique is not. The late professor of philosophy, Robert John Ackermann, wrote a book of the same title that argued, much like Ahmad’s tracing of the Islamic genealogy of critique to the Axial Age, that religions (in which he also included Marxism) while dead in their orthodoxy are “alive in providing a source of critical ideas for evaluating surrounding society” (Ackermann, p. 1). Religions’ inherent ability to demand the “ought” rather than accept the “is” means that no matter how accommodating a form they have taken to their surrounding context, “they retain the potential for pungent social critique” (p. 1). However, the comparison between the two ends here, as Ackermann’s book remains a theoretical argument based in philosophy, while Ahmad’s is an anthropological work that seeks to demonstrate that thesis.

Furthermore, independent of the book’s larger contribution to Critical Muslim Studies, Chapter 4 serves as an excellent introduction to Maududi’s importance as a political thinker and theorist and can serve as a reference point for anyone desiring a short introduction to Maududi.
Last, though it may have been based more on the author’s deficiency in other Islamicate languages than anything else, it was still refreshing to see a book think about matters Islamicate through the context of the Indian subcontinent, which has been one of the most vibrant scenes of Islamic thought and scholarship in the modern period. Ultimately, with *Religion as Critique*, Ahmad makes an important contribution to the field of anthropology. It is a testament to how Asad’s work is being continued and expanded in new exciting directions. I look forward to seeing how the new space opened by this book will be expanded and if other books will further explore notions of critique and “criticality” in Islam and throughout other Islamicate traditions.

**References**
