

Does Ambiguity Create a Progressive Culture? The Projection of New Orientalism in an Alternative Cultural History Writing

Müphemlik Bir Kültür Oluşturur mu?: Alternatif Bir Kültür Tarihi Yazımında Anakronizmin Yeni Oryantalizme İzdüşümü

Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, 323 p., ISBN: 9780231170659

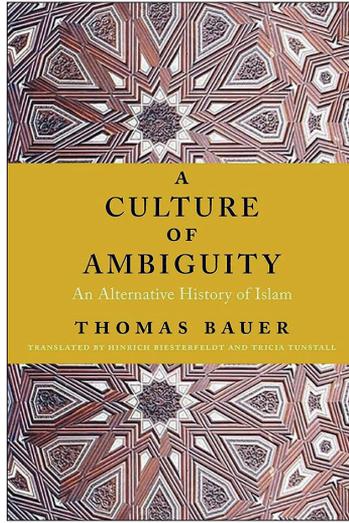
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İslam has constantly commanded considerable attention within Western intellectual circles, leading to the construction of diverse perceptions. In his renowned literary work, *A Passage to India*, E. M. Forster adeptly portrays the intricate web of perplexity and differing perceptions surrounding the Muslim world. The novel encapsulates numerous thought-provoking facets,

with paramount emphasis placed on the pivotal juncture of the narrative, embodied by the Marabar Caves. Within the narrative, the characters Miss Adele Quested, an emblem of English refinement, and Mrs. Moore, a longstanding friend of Dr. Aziz, are extended an invitation to embark on an expedition to the Marabar Caves. These caverns, veiled in obscurity and possessing confined dimensions, become the backdrop for a critical turning point. In this context, Adela Quested, grappling with psychological instability, encounters a perplexing auditory phenomenon within the Marabar Caves, which profoundly affects her. Abruptly departing the caves, she is consumed by an amalgamation of anger and exasperation, subsequently levying accusations against Dr. Aziz, contending that he harbored hostile intentions and assaulted her. Ironically, her distressing experience within the caves merely involves the repetition of a solitary sound, “bou-oum”, reverberating through the darkness. This strange sound is heard by the antagonized figure, Dr. Aziz, as well. However, this auditory phenomenon engenders profoundly disparate interpretations from the diametrically opposed vantage points of the British ruling elite and the Indian Muslim community, both pivotal in the unfolding legal proceedings. Remarkably, for the British, the alleged transgression serves as yet another corroborative instance fortifying their prevailing preconception of an uncultivated Muslim society, characterized not only by diminished intellectual acumen but also by an aesthetic allure inferior to that of their white counterparts within the upper echelons of society. Consequently, this auditory echo emerges as a poignant metaphor emblematic of the inherent tensions arising from cross-cultural interactions and the combination of conflicting perceptions. Nearly a century subsequent to the publication of Forster’s novel, the reverberations of the same auditory echo endure in the intellectual milieu, retaining an inherent capacity to evoke profoundly intriguing images within Western intellectual spheres.

A significant endeavor aimed at contextualizing the resounding “bou-oum” echo emerges through the stimulating work titled *A Culture of Ambiguity* authored by the esteemed scholar, Thomas Bauer. Bauer’s work, titled “Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams” was published in German in 2011 by Verlag der Weltreligionen in Berlin. Swiftly garnering recognition, it emerged as a profoundly contemplative book within Germany’s field of Islamic Studies (Islamwissenschaften), holding the distinction of being one of the most thought-provoking publications in recent years and was awarded the prestigious Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize. It has been translated into Turkish, Arabic and Slovenian. The English version consists of a Foreword and nine chapters.

In the *Foreword*, Bauer first expresses his regret at the lack of merit of the many books cramming libraries and bookshelves in the West, written by the overnight experts of Islam who miraculously (since they lack the necessary proficiency, starting with the alphabet) conceived the essence of Islam and felt the urge to enlighten not only their own community, but also Muslims about the ‘essence of Islam’. Motivated in part by this sense of regret and partially driven by his disillusionment with the proclivity of Western culture to relentlessly pursue

certainty at every level and *intolerance* to ambiguity, the author sets out to write an unusual cultural history of Islam utilizing a key concept: ‘*tolerance of ambiguity*’.

Considering the inexorable constraints inherent in tracing the cultural history of Islam from its inception, Bauer circumscribes his purview to delineate a temporal and geographical scope. His study oscillates between the locales of Egypt and Iran, encapsulating the historical period spanning approximately from the ninth to the fifteenth century CE, and subsequently transitions to the modern epoch, encompassing the final two centuries. Within this delineated framework, Bauer’s primary objective resides in illustrating how the classical epochs witnessed a profound embrace of intricacy and uncertainty across manifold domains. Be it jurisprudence or spirituality, linguistic or literary facets, conceptualizations of governance or matters of intimacy, or the intricate interactions with foreign entities, these arenas resonated with a poised acceptance of multifaceted complexity and inherent ambiguity. This disposition often manifested itself through a noticeably enthusiastic revelry in the very intricacies that pervaded these domains.

In the Introduction, Bauer explicitly states that his approach differs from the typical Eurocentric perspective encapsulated in the term “Golden Age of Islam”, which implies a subsequent period of stagnation and decline. Instead, his intention is to avoid this rhetoric and focus on post-formative Islam, as well as contemporary Islam, to address cultural phenomena rather than political ones (pp. 5-6). The author argues that there are three significant periods in the formative stage of Islam: the Seljuqs, the era of the Ayyubids and the Mamluks, and finally, the Ottomans. Therefore, throughout the book, the term “classical Islam” should be understood as referring to Sunni Islam as it evolved during the Seljuq, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods, although the usage of the term differs somewhat from its conventional interpretation (pp. 7-9).

After outlining his objective in the Introduction, Bauer proceeds to Chapter 1, where he strives to establish the definition of the term “cultural ambiguity” and conduct a thorough analysis of it:

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).

The primary objective of this definition is evidently to expand the scope of ambiguity and extend it not only to literary studies and linguistics but also to encompass cultural and social phenomena. Another significant aspect of this definition is its connection of ambiguity to the social realm and public opinion. It is no longer perceived as an individualistic effort to comprehend a particular text or to hold a specific viewpoint on a certain subject; rather, it involves contradictory meanings embraced by different segments of society. Subsequently, the author delves into exploring the role and significance of cultural ambiguity within various spheres of the Western intellectual landscape, such as philosophy, social sciences, and psychology.

This enables him to draw a comparison between the Western tradition and the Islamic one, leading to the conclusion that at a certain point during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, due to encounters with Western European imperialism and colonialism, contemporary 'Islam' relinquished its cultural or civilizational resilience, replacing it with an 'intolerance of ambiguity' (pp.16–18).

In the second chapter, Bauer delves deeper into the discourse of cultural ambiguity and employs concrete examples to further validate the main argument he introduced in the first chapter: that prior to the encounter with Western enlightenment and its emphasis on a singular truth, the Muslim world nurtured and exemplified significant instances of cultural ambiguity. To illustrate this point, Bauer examines numerous cases from Islamic cultural history. For instance, according to the author, all disciplines within Islam emerge as a synthesis of initially 'conflicting' discourses. This is attributed to the Islamic culture's acceptance of diverse discourses and varying interpretations. Simultaneously, this culture incorporates ambiguous texts, actions, and spaces, and actively develops contemplation on the concept of ambiguity. For example, the Ash'arī scholars integrated Greek philosophy into Islamic theology while retaining certain traditional stances, and al-Ghazālī successfully transformed the challenges posed by Sufism into a cohesive Islamic structure. Bauer also underscores that *ḥadīths*, akin to modern interpretation, are assessed not as definitive right or wrong, but within the framework of an open theory of possibilities. Moreover, he highlights that there are numerous aspects of ambiguity present within Islamic law and the Qur'an. An illustrative instance, he argues, is the boundless diversity of variant readings (*qirā'āt*) that permit distinct recitations, each respected and embraced by different Muslim communities.

In Chapter 3, Bauer provides a further detailed explanation of the argument for ambiguity. He employs the example of Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsīr*) to illustrate how a robust tradition has been developed to facilitate the coexistence and perpetuation of diverse opinions regarding the fundamental source of Islam. Bauer underscores that this natural inclination towards tolerance nurtured an oral transmission of the Qur'an and subsequently enabled the existence of a wide array of distinct readings, as seen in the cases of the Seven Readings or Ten Readings. Bauer goes on to criticize the modernist approach, typified by figures like Taha Husayn (d. 1973) and Mawdūdī (d. 1979), for their exposure to Western traditions. He contends that the modernists attempted to eradicate the intricate and diverse culture of potential meanings, which Bauer views as the foundation of the philological approach employed by Islamic scholars when interpreting the Qur'an. As a result, Bauer argues that Taha Husayn's approach to the Qur'an is fundamentally Cartesian, implying that its superficial attributes prevent it from effectively addressing the complexities associated with interpreting the Seven Readings (pp. 59-60). At this point, Bauer, in contrast to the prevailing perspective, asserts that the Wahhābī trend is not traditional but modern. He further notes that innovative, secular Muslims share similar discourse with the Wahhābīs, exemplified by figures like Ibn 'Uthaymīn. In his view, these

currents aligned with the modern trajectory exhibit an intolerance and monopolistic stance toward the culture of ambiguity. In contrast, Bauer portrays Ibn Jazarī (d. 1429) as being somewhat postmodern and displaying a disposition of tolerance towards ambiguity. Significantly, Bauer attributes the emergence of this intolerance towards ambiguity, embodied in the modern context through the ‘Salafī approach’, to the influences of Western modernity (pp. 60-62). In order to enhance the reader’s comprehension of the value of this open and multifaceted approach, the author draws attention to the Biblical Tradition, where standardized translations are pursued.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to the ḥadīth tradition and its process of canonization. By analyzing the compilation of ḥadīths and the emergence of collections, Bauer draws on the authority of the renowned scholar al-Suyūṭī, who narrates the ḥadīth, “... difference of opinions among my companions is a mercy for you.” Bauer asserts that despite the evident variations among many ḥadīths and the irreconcilable differences among early *fiqh* authorities, these conflicting viewpoints were regarded as a positive aspect, serving as further evidence of tolerance for ambiguity. Bauer goes on to argue that the contemporary challenges posed by the Wahhābīs to the authenticity of the aforementioned ḥadīth, along with their endeavor to eliminate the apparent differences between the companions and the early authorities of *fiqh*, validate his hypothesis. He suggests that due to the influence of Western rationalist modernity, the Salafī/Wahhābī movement has transformed into a quest for a form of certainty that opposes the plurality of potential truths (pp. 125-128).

In Chapter 5, the aim is to address the question of why the tolerance for ambiguity faded in Muslim societies, giving way to an intense focus on a uniform, rigid interpretation of religion. Bauer contends that the answer lies in the modern-era endeavor of Muslim scholars to “Islamize Islam.” This effort is driven by the notion that everything constructed throughout the history of Islam pertains to the religious realm, and the separation between the religious and secular aspects of life is a foreign concept to Islam. By alienating the secular facet of life, Muslim intellectuals and scholars constructed an almost fictionalized past, amalgamating the parallel, distinct categories of everyday life—secular and religious—into a single sacred Islamic entity. The author asserts that this profoundly modern assumption obscures the diversity of opinions, cultural pluralities, and ambiguities that were inherent in the classical Islamic tradition. Bauer argues that claiming an inability to distinguish between the religious and the secular domains within Islam would result in detrimental consequences. This is because, throughout its history, Islam maintained a secular domain that operated independently of religion, allowing these two domains to remain distinct from each other. Bauer presents an illustrative case to support his argument by pointing out the discourse of “Islamic medicine”. He contends that this discourse arises from the disregard of the fact that medicine functioned as a distinct subsystem with its own experts, whose knowledge adhered strictly to the standards of their own field. Simultaneously, another form of medicine—the so-called “medicine of the Prophet”—existed in society, operating independently from the scientific medicine practiced at the time. According

to Bauer, the coexistence of these different types of medicines without undermining each other was only feasible due to the prevailing culture of ambiguity. However, he asserts that the term “Islamic medicine” undermines this coexistence by neglecting the diverse range of Near Eastern discourses concerning medicine. This, in turn, leads to a deceptive and unrealistic comprehension of Islamic culture by negating the inherent plurality within it.

In Chapter 6, Bauer shifts the focus to the Arabic language and its significant influence on shaping culture. He asserts that Arabic poetry holds a central position within the Arabic language and serves as a prime example of cultural ambiguity. He attributes the achievements in establishing an ‘Arabic empire’ and the literary accomplishments in establishing a written bureaucratic and administrative language to the groundwork laid by Arabs during the pre-Islamic period.

Furthermore, Bauer argues that the endeavors of early scholars of the Arabic language were not aimed at comprehending a sacred text or a holy language. Instead, their focus was solely on understanding the secular facets of heritage, folklore, and poetry that were part of the cultural tradition. By highlighting the secular dimensions of Arabic language and culture, Bauer underscores the importance of appreciating the broader context in which language plays a pivotal role.

In Chapter 7, Bauer delves into the concept of sex and the literature associated with it. He uses *mujūn* poetry to illustrate that sex was not a topic that poets or authors avoided or a taboo. Instead, it was distinctly separated from the theme of love and was openly discussed in the extensive literature of the time. Therefore, Bauer argues that the Islamic milieu inherited a historical openness about sex, as opposed to the West. He asserts that in the West, sex was merged with love and suppressed under strict rules imposed by the Church. However, once freed from the Church’s authority, the West constructed what Bauer terms as ‘sexuality’, characterized by rigid norms aimed at eliminating any ambiguity surrounding sex and erotic sentiments. Bauer further notes that when Muslim scholars encountered the West, they adopted these Western-invented guidelines, leading to a swift transformation towards homophobia and intolerance towards any form of desire deemed ‘outside of norms’ within the realm of romance or sensuality.

In Chapter 8, Bauer tackles the realm of political discourse. He arrives at the conclusion that throughout history and even in the present, there have existed both discourses informed by religion and discourses informed by secular considerations. This fact, he argues, supports the notion that the separation between religious and political authority has been evident in the majority of Islamic history (p. 222). Furthermore, Bauer disputes the idea that the precolonial Islamic world was engaged in religiously motivated violence despite its theological claim to truth. Instead, he posits that the emergence of religiously motivated violence must be associated with a decline in the tolerance for ambiguity. Similarly, due to their lack of an obsession with a singular claim to truth, Muslim scholars developed an understanding of

natural phenomena driven purely by curiosity. As a result, they lacked the desire for colonial and missionary expansion. Bauer refers to this perspective as a “serene view of the world” (p. 215). In essence, Bauer’s analysis in Chapter 8 highlights how shifts in societal attitudes and perspectives, especially the tolerance for ambiguity, can significantly influence both political discourse and the inclination towards violence or expansion.

In Chapter 9, Bauer suggests a re-examination of the contemporary pursuit of certainty and the methods employed in this pursuit. He argues that classical Islamic scholarship embraced a pluralistic approach to Islam. Disciplines like jurisprudence, ḥadīth, and kalām, with their varying methodologies and epistemologies, held contrasting worldviews and diverged on numerous matters. Yet, they coexisted respectfully and collectively contributed to a rich cultural heritage due to their tolerance for ambiguity. In contrast, modern Islamism strives to provide definitive answers to every question and rejects the notion of pluralism and diversity. It seeks a standardized, universally applicable approach that encompasses all areas using a single method based on a single principle. Bauer contends that contemporary Islam is undergoing a transformation akin to the transition Europe experienced at the outset of the 17th century. As a result, both modernist thinkers and Islamist projects are constructing a modern Islamic theory of knowledge. This theory integrates fundamental modern epistemological concepts such as phenomenology, historicism, and relativism, as well as ideas like democracy and the state, into Islamic discourse (p. 268).

Undoubtedly, Bauer’s commendable achievement lies in his adept illustration of the cultural history of the Near East through the prism of the principle of tolerance for ambiguity. Equally deserving of recognition are his audacious engagement with his Western peers, his redirection towards often overlooked domains, and his intrepid utilization of sources culled from the specific historical epochs he delineates. In doing so, he deliberately disengages from prevailing conventional historical narratives. Another salient facet of this scholarly investigation is its emphasis on elucidating the significant correlation between the methodology of Wahhābī thought and the extensive influence of modern Western ideas—an aspect that has regrettably been underemphasized in extant scholarly discourse.

Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of Bauer’s work that require careful evaluation and demand a thorough examination. A primary consideration pertains to the defined parameters of Bauer’s investigation, which inherently presents limitations. As a proficient authority in Arabic studies, Bauer’s focal areas predominantly revolve around specific domains of culture, encompassing language, poetry, Qur’anic exegesis (tafsīr), and ḥadīth. It is evident, however, that the endeavor of constructing a comprehensive cultural history necessitates a broader purview, potentially necessitating the inclusion or even prioritization of certain foundational components, commencing with Sufism, philosophy, and kalām. Particularly, the noteworthy historical conflicts about divergent assertions of religious truth between Sufis, philosophers, and kalām scholars, spanning extended periods and even involving the execution of prominent

figures, remain notably underrepresented within the book's discourse. This omission regrettably diminishes the comprehensive understanding of cultural dynamics and the complexities therein.

Another problematic aspect lies in Bauer's selection of specific examples. For instance, his assertion regarding the prevalence of sexual themes in *mojūn* poetry is highly contentious, primarily due to the scarcity of explicit sexual content within *mojūn*. Similarly, he appears to disregard the intense doctrinal disputes that arose among various sects of *fiqh* schools, particularly the debates between Ḥanafīs and Shāfi'īs. Instead, he leans towards referencing less contentious subjects, such as variations among the companions or divergent *ḥadīths* addressing the same issue. Bauer adeptly employs these disparities to conceal the ensuing conflicts between different sects concerning their claims of doctrinal authenticity.

Given Bauer's expertise in the Mamluk period of Islamic cultural history, it is understandable that his arguments and examples predominantly draw from this context. However, an inherent limitation emerges in his relative omission of a pivotal epoch in Islamic history, the Ottoman Empire. This oversight is noteworthy, as the Ottoman period potentially provides a rich array of evidence to illustrate that tolerance to ambiguity had its bounds, and the pursuit of certainty emerged as a central theme within the cultural and intellectual milieu. Moreover, the language barrier adds a further dimension to this limitation, with Persian and Turkish literature often experiencing what could be termed as "benign neglect". Particularly, the spheres of Turkish and Persian art, literature, poetry, and music harbor significant insights regarding the concept of ambiguity. The absence of discourse on these domains appears as a notable omission, considering their potential contribution. Furthermore, the absence of a discussion on the interplay between tolerance and intolerance towards minorities within the Ottoman Empire stands as a significant gap. This omission prevents an exploration of how the concept of ambiguity shaped interactions between different religious and ethnic communities within this historical context. In essence, the absence of an Ottoman perspective, combined with the underrepresentation of Turkish and Persian literary and artistic contributions, limits the comprehensiveness of Bauer's analysis and potentially overlooks crucial dynamics related to the theme of tolerance to ambiguity.

A more critical concern pertains to the methodology employed by Bauer. In the *Foreword*, Bauer rightfully criticizes individuals who hastily aim to illuminate Muslims about their own religion, highlighting their lack of nuanced understanding. However, Bauer's own methodology often results in a similar outcome throughout much of the book. This becomes particularly evident in his assertion regarding the process of "Islamizing Islam". Bauer argues that contemporary scholars are prone to negating the secular dimensions of Islamic culture and are inclined to "Islamize" every secular aspect of the historical past. Yet, his contentions about the secular nature of certain cultural elements appear inadequately substantiated. For example, his allegations regarding the secular motivations and interests of Muslim scholars in the realm of linguistic studies appear unfounded. Furthermore, even if one were to entertain the notion that

their motivations for linguistic studies were not exclusively religious, it remains problematic to postulate the existence of any form of secularity as understood in the contemporary sense. It should be noted that secularism is a modern construct rooted primarily in Western culture, with motivations and foundations differing markedly from historical contexts. Strikingly, Bauer's employment of secularity seems to be devoid of an examination of its emergence as a product of modernity and Western epistemology. This omission is perplexing, particularly given the expectation that Bauer would consider secularity as an effect of modernity and Western influence. Instead, he seems to accept its existence as a given and endeavors to trace its presence in the historical past, yielding an approach that could be deemed anachronistic within the framework of Islamic culture.

Moreover, Bauer's grasp of the term "Islamic" appears to be somewhat perplexed. It would indeed be strange to contend that the attribute of "Islamic" in terms like Islamic philosophy implies that it is exclusively a philosophy rooted in Islam or the Qur'an. Rather, it inherently signifies a cultural and geographical context, encompassing all philosophical endeavors that have arisen within the broader framework of Islamic civilization, irrespective of the religious affiliation of the philosophers involved. This logic similarly extends to designations like Islamic architecture and Islamic art. Thus, referring to something as Islamic does not inherently entail an ideological or religious assertion, nor does it imply an attempt at Islamization. Instead, it reflects a manifestation of the prevalent tolerance within Islamic civilization for a diverse array of religious and cultural identities coexisting harmoniously. In this context, drawing upon Marshall Hodgson's distinction between Islam and Islamicate could offer additional depth to the discourse. This differentiation serves to underscore the nuanced interplay between the religion of Islam and the broader cultural and societal framework in which it operates, enhancing the understanding of the multifaceted relationships within Islamic civilization.

Despite its shortcomings, Bauer's work holds significant value in its portrayal of the diverse manifestations of the concept of ambiguity across a wide spectrum of cultural practices, an achievement that merits commendation. The book also serves to exemplify how a relatively overlooked concept can be effectively employed to reevaluate various dimensions of Islamic cultural history. Notably, his approach offers insights not only into the concept of ambiguity itself but also into the possibility of engaging in a reverse exercise—namely, interpreting Islamic culture through the lenses of the concepts of "truth" (al-ḥaqq) and "certitude" (yaqīn).

