

## Reply to Anidjar, Fernando, Lawrence, and Moumtaz

2019, Vol. 7(2) 199–207

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DOI: 10.1177/2050303219848052

[journals.sagepub.com/home/crr](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crr)**Irfan Ahmad** Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity,  
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Fascinating it is to have Gil Anidjar, Mayanthi Fernando, Bruce Lawrence, and Nada Moumtaz as readers who think with, and what may occasionally appear to some, against the author. They do so, in different ways, descriptively as well as generatively. It is the critical, generative dimension—not simply the reasonable (and unexpected, too) praise and appreciation, which nonetheless help evaluate one's intellectual labor—that ought to interest an author. Or, so do I think. Thus, I begin by thanking them! To Yunus Doğan Telliel, I thank for organizing this symposium.

Since their comments are significantly varied, rich, dense, and instituted from multiple standpoints, disciplinary and thematic, here I am unable, due mainly to word limit, to address them all. I take up select issues raised by each.

At the center of Anidjar's reflections is the notion of time in Kant's 1784 essay (Kant 2007) and the many responses to it. His contention is that not only did Kant pose the question "What is Aufklärung" in the present tense, since then readers, including Foucault, too have commented on it "in the grammatical present . . . and about the present moment." It is against this attitude of presentism, and I should add in resonance with my own description of it (Ahmad 2017a, 32ff), that he asks, almost defiantly: "What *Was* Enlightenment?" Although Foucault dwells on the then and now of the Enlightenment thereby introducing history, unlike Kant, Anidjar reads him (Foucault) interested primarily in "*the difference that yesterday introduces with respect to today*" (Anidjar 2019, 174, italics in original). Drawing on Susan Buck-Morss' work on Hegel, he finds the latter also preoccupied with his present.<sup>1</sup> Anidjar thus observes that if Kant designated his age as the age of the Enlightenment, "Ahmad certainly dares to know . . . our present" and "ours is the age of Islam as critique" (178).

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Wait! Am I interested in the present in the ways Kant, Hegel, and Foucault were? In his exposition, Anidjar uses “now”, “the present” and “contemporary moment” as interchangeable. Probably they are not. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, they respectively mean: “at the present time or moment,” “the current moment, period, or age . . . opposed to the past and the future,” and “belonging to the same time, age, or period . . . modern” (*OED Online* 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Is the present necessarily opposed to the past or the future, however? Is this even possible? Relatedly, does the present, as usually construed, exist in the first place? The Indian philosopher–statesman Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958) doubted it. In a letter written from the British prison in 1943, Azad (1996, 248–249) wrote about Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1058), an Arab poet–philosopher. Commenting on al-Ma‘arrī’s tripartite division of time (*zamāna*) into yesterday, today, and tomorrow, he asked if the present (*ḥāl*) indeed existed. To Azad, past (*māzī*) and future (*mustaqbil*) were two temporalities (*zamānōn*; sing. *zamāna*) of which *ḥāl* was only an additional continuation (*tasalsul*). True, in addition to the past and present, time also has a third feature—the present—but, he mused, it arrives to pass so rapidly that seldom can we grasp it. In the very thought of chasing the present, Azad continued, it changes its feature (*nō‘īat*) thereby leaving us only with the past and the future.

The present Anidjar engages with is different. The times of Kant, Hegel and those writing about them in and for the present fuse such to become a “history of the present.” How long is this present? What texture does it possess? When did it begin? Did it begin in the fifth century, when modern (in its Latin form) was deployed to “distinguish the present, which had become officially Christian, from the Roman and pagan past” (Habermas and Ben-Habib 1981, 3)? Or, did it emerge from the seventeenth century “onwards” in Europe to spread across the world (Giddens 1990, 1)? The word “onwards” is striking in that modernity as the present condition distinct from the past *continues* and, therefore, it cannot be of yore. If the time from the seventeenth century until now constitutes the present, it is a present quite unlike Azad’s. It is also a fairly long one, bordering on permanence (until further notice, perhaps)!

Foucault’s preoccupation with the present indeed characterized his entire corpus. In an interview (published only in 2014), he remarked that if there was a “certain coherence in what I do”, it is because he addressed Kant’s “question ‘What is Enlightenment?’—that is to say, ‘What is our current situation? What is happening around us . . .?’” (2014, 236). But as Anidjar (2019, 178–179) deftly notes, Foucault did “historical research” and dealt with the past, albeit unconventionally.

“What is Critique?” speaks of history frequently. It is indeed “the history of the critical attitude” (Foucault 2007a, 43, 69)—a phrase uttered twice. Foucault’s history, pursued through a “historical-philosophical” framework and at once indebted to and departing from Kant,<sup>2</sup> reads as follows: The critical attitude, unfolding in the modern West around the sixteenth century, “must have its origin in the religious struggle . . . during the second half of the Middle Age.” Acting pastorally, the Christian Church came to govern human life comprehensively. Directed at salvation, life got hooked on obedience. Initially limited to monasteries, with “a veritable explosion of the art of governing men”, from the fifteenth century onwards, it also encompassed civil society. “Born in Europe” as a “specific attitude” and in relation to the Scriptures, critique was a refusal to the “governmentalization of both society and individuals” presided over by the “ecclesiastical rule.” Foucault the genealogist even offered its definition: “the art of not being governed so much.” To exercise a critical

attitude was thus to “insure the desubjugation of the subject.” Power, truth, and the subject formed a relational triad at “the core of critique” (69, 58, 44–45, 47).

This was Foucault’s history guided by a set of questions. My questions are different. Building on Talal Asad’s (1993, 2003) works, I am interested in what an anthropology of critique might look like outside of Europe/Christianity. What does critique do in a tradition that has nothing similar to the Church nor did it have/require the *Aufklärung* and where relations among power, truth, and the subject—themselves historically situated—are obtained differently? How is life intertwined with death connected to critique? Is it possible to envision critique emerging from the Qur’ān, not, à la Foucault, in opposition to the Scripture? Did not critique prevail, or at least exist, before the explosion of the art of governing? These comparative-anthropological questions took me, inter alia, to the axial age and Hijaz to read the prophets’ mission as one that of enacting reform (*Iṣlāh*): to reform was to critique and to critique was to reform. Notably, Foucault did not ask such questions. Throughout concerned with Europe, he only compared Europe diagonally (Hallaq 2018, 15). Such were the concerns and questions that led me to view critique as “transformative.” It was transformative also in the sense of enunciating another way of thinking predicated on beckoning a different future, one that, *pace* Foucault (2007b, 114), is radical and liberated from the inevitable “return of the most dangerous traditions.” Anidjar’s suggestion that my notion of critique as “transformative” speaks to “conversion” as *espistrophē*, *metanoia*, or Foucault’s alternative to both is tempting. The temptation ought to be guarded, at least for now.

If *Religion as Critique*, as Anidjar (2019, 173) describes it, is a “provocative intervention,” one key element of it is to enunciate a tradition, thinking, and history (with due qualifications) of critique other than the one Foucault insightfully offers.

Important to this intervention are accounts of prophets from Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, up to Muhammad as well as ‘ulema. I discuss the dream in the form of a debate (*baḥās*) Shah Waliullah had in the precinct of *Ka’ba* in the early eighteenth century. Fernando’s remark that my intervention, as also Asad’s, “parallels” nineteenth century Sri Lanka’s Buddhist monks’ response in a debate with Christian missionaries on terms set by the latter, therefore, seems close to puzzling. It is one thing to say that my intervention—like any other, not excluding her own—is informed by “the asymmetric geopolitics of the contemporary moment,” (Fernando 2019, 182) quite another to imprison it within the four walls of that contemporaneity. The book’s theses, let me stress, are instituted with careful attention to the asymmetrical world (dis)order.

Even more puzzling is the style in which Fernando (2019, 183) frames her commentary in which there are no more than two parties: Europeans set the question and non-Europeans feel “obliged to respond”. Are not many questions already answers and, therefore, they beg further questions in the same way as many answers are and can be questions? Moreover, rather than assuming a prior category of “European,” did not it emerge, in part, out of this very debate and interaction (van der Veer 2001)? To remain with Fernando’s question–response model, an interesting point, however, is how one reflects on that geopolitics. An influential and standard stance—for example, Edward Said’s—has been to respond by loyally remaining within the universe of the discourse. Said’s ideal was the Enlightenment and its secular humanism (Hallaq 2018). As is well known, he called himself a secular critic. He is even credited with coining “secular criticism” (Gourgouris 2013, xv). Lamenting that the contemporary critics had become “cleric,” Said invoked the Enlightenment for critique to “become a truly secular enterprise” (1983, 292).<sup>3</sup> *Religion as Critique* presupposes no such

ideal. Nor does it theorize critique in terms of clerical-secular polarity. Rather, it undoes that very polarity.

Without discussing the premise of an absolute, pure outside that undergirds her comment, I turn to the subject of cultural translation Fernando productively raises about my book. She seems uncomfortable with my position, which is “neither one of radical incommensurability between Islamic and Western notions of critique, nor of absolute isomorphism between the two. Instead I favor a robust dialogue and comparison” (Ahmad cited in Fernando 2019, 184). Based on her interpretation of Asad, she takes translation as scandal only. She finds aspects of my book “that cause the kind of scandal Asad advocates, including the argument that the Enlightenment was an ‘ethnic project’” (Fernando 2019, 185). Likewise, she applauds my refusal to translate ‘ulema as clerics. The non-scandalous, in her reading, is my assumption of critique as a universal “master category” for I “consistently transl[at]e... *tanqīd* and *naqd* as critique.”<sup>4</sup> In doing so, thus runs her assumption, I am insufficiently attentive to incommensurability and untranslatability.

Asad undoubtedly is right that translation occurs across unequal languages. However, I do not think Asad implies that every translation must be scandalous. If it were *only* scandalous, Asad would not find merits in the translational works of Rachid Ghanushi (Mahmood 1996). Scandalous and non-scandalous at times may co-travel. One should thus gainfully speak of the nature, degree, specificity, and purpose of both incommensurability and untranslatability, which Fernando construes as defiance against the Western academy.

Western academics, especially in the securityscape,<sup>5</sup> and media often do not translate jihad. Likewise, the media does not translate Allah-o-Akbar which was/is supposedly uttered when a Muslim indulges in shooting (when non-Muslim shooters kill, they do not utter anything, certainly no religious words). It is unclear to me how such acts of untranslatability and incommensurability secure liberation—a goal that is Fernando’s, others’, and mine too. If they do, whose liberation is it? Is it liberation in the first place?<sup>6</sup>

Part of Fernando’s commentary emanates from another misunderstanding as she interprets me as responding to the question: “are Muslims capable of critique?” Anticipating a possible misinterpretation of my main concern in the book, I indeed included the following remark in the preface: “Beyond perfunctory apologia such as ‘Muslims also have a tradition of critique like the West has’, it argues for the specificity of Islam and the need for a genuine democratic dialogue with different traditions”(Ahmad 2017, xii). With the comparative goal of my inquiry, which she notes, as well as the genealogical approach for which I draw on Nietzsche and Foucault through Asad, her premise about universalism is unsustainable. If anything, Foucault (2008, 3) distrusted universals, due, among others, to his concerns with “concrete practices.” From this perspective, I am unsure if Dipesh Chakrabarty, as Fernando suggests, would be helpful for the enterprise that *Religion as Critique* is.

In *Habitations of Modernity*, Chakrabarty dwells on how to relate to difference, especially about India’s partition that resulted in mass violence. Treating the political and ethical as separate, he aims to find an “ethical space.” To this end, Chakrabarty distinguishes between *identity* and *proximity*. While identity is “a mode of relating... in which difference is either... frozen, fixed, or it is erased by some claim of being identical or the same,” proximity is an obverse mode in which difference “is neither reified nor erased but negotiated” (2002, 140). Chakrabarty recounts the 1991 trip he and his parents made to Bangladesh where his father was born and raised but which he left after the partition in 1947. The Muslim family that his father had employed (as servants?) now lived in his house. Its oldest male member recognized Chakrabarty’s father. Sensing that he had come to reclaim his

property, there was deep tension, especially among members younger than the old man who said: “you can take it back, if you want.” After this quote, Chakrabarty writes:

That was the field of the political coming into our conversations. Once we assured them, however, that we had come simply to see the house, that I lived outside India and had no practical interest in acquiring property in Bangladesh, they relaxed. And then a space opened-up for what I have called *the practice of proximity* . . . (147, italics in original)

*Religion as Critique* contests this style of finding “ethical space” for it amounts to tutoring the subalternated (not subaltern) Bangladeshi Muslim family into ethics as if it did not have any ethics or notion of proximity of its own until introduced by Chakrabarty. Instead, my book takes Muslims as thinking and ethical subjects in their own right. It is worth noting, *en passant*, that subaltern studies of which Chakrabarty was/is a prominent advocate, claimed to question the tutorial impulse of the liberal-elite historiography.

Unlike Chakrabarty who, in his exchange with the Muslim family, does not tell readers the words used in Bangla, Moumtaz’s comments are precisely of that nature. To better capture the aim of the book, which “pulls the rug under very common presumptions about Islam,” (Moumtaz 2019, 194) she suggests using debate, not critique, because the latter seems to be a modern reformulation of Islamic tradition in conversation with the Enlightenment tradition. In her view, debate brings less of the Enlightenment understandings that come with critique. Cognizant of my limitation in Arabic, particularly of the treatise Moumtaz introduces, I address her perceptive question preliminarily. As she reads it, Ibn Taymiyya’s (d. 1328) *Naqd Marātib al-Ijmāʿ* uses نَقْد (naqd) in the title but its aim is far from accomplishing critique as understood in English. In it, he cites passages he disagrees with from Ibn Ḥazm’s *Degrees of Consensus* and rebuts them. That is, rather than “subjecting the terms of the debate to critique (for instance, rejecting the notion of consensus),” (Moumtaz 2019, 196), Ibn Taymiyya accepts Ibn Ḥazm’s premises to show his disagreement only about some claims. So, *naqd*, as used by Ibn Taymiyya, Moumtaz suggests, does not have the sense of an all-round disagreement with or a systematic criticism of a viewpoint, especially of an opponent, for which, the Arabic words are نَقْض (naqd) and radd (refutation). *Al-Mawrid Arabic-English Dictionary* (1995) glosses *naqd* as nullification, quashing, reversal, and so on.

I have more to say about Ibn Taymiyya below. Let me note here the benefits of retaining critique in place of debate. To begin with, debate, as in the Sri Lankan case Fernando discusses, usually assumes two rival parties. Its aim is also dualistic: victory or defeat; or at least, a scoring of points. Verily, its participants tend to find faults in the opponents’ stance or position. Objections, claims, and counter claims, even accusations, may surround a debate. Critique transcends such practices to say and show not only why and how a position is problematic but also to lay bare the larger assumptions the position stems from. In so doing, critique—a thorough and good one—also draws an alternative portrait. It describes not only why a thing is, how it is, but also how it could be other than what it is. Marx, unlike Weber, was interested not in some aspects of capitalism, which he critiqued by demonstrating how it has come about and the core elements that constitute it. His interest instead was in capitalist economy as a social form in its entirety. He also outlined an alternative to capitalism.

Anjum (2012, 206 n.22, 277, 177) and Hallaq (1993, 187–188, li, xlvi), two specialists on this subject, give precisely such a notion of critique at work in Ibn Taymiyya’s writings in the



titles of which appear *naqd*, *naqđ*, and *radd*. Neither Anjum nor Hallaq, however, discuss these terms and their linguistically–historically evolved usage, let alone the ways they differ from one another. Yet, both regularly describe Ibn Taymiyya’s works as work of critique. Hallaq (1993, xxxiii, xxxix) even calls Ibn Taymiyya a “critic” and discusses “sources of the critique.” To Anjum (2012, 177), his was “a total critique,” “starting with its intellectual apparatus and social and political institutions.” Importantly, while introducing Ibn Taymiyya’s *al-Radd ‘alā al-Mantiqiyīn*, Hallaq views his intervention as critique rather than refutation. He does discuss instances of refutation by Ibn Taymiyya but rightly views them not as a goal in itself but an aid to achieving something else, which is critique. Insofar as I view critique as different from debate and refutation/rebuttal, and this is what it ought to be, it is worth quoting Hallaq (1993, xlvi): “Ibn Taymiyya’s genius does not lie in the particular arguments he adduced...rather, his genius manifests itself in creating from the material that consisted of these particular arguments, a complete, systematic, and coherent critique.” Himself a Sufi, Ibn Taymiyya did not simply object to the dominant doctrine of *vahdat al-vajūd* (a topic discussed in my Prologue); he went into its conceptual, logical, and philosophical postulates (and its implications) to show its weakness and offered a full-scale rationale thereof.<sup>7</sup>

I wanted to respond to Moutaz’s pertinent question about critique and its relations with orthodoxy. But space allows me only to say a word or two about Lawrence’s observations composed in lyrical prose. In particular, he notes my anthropological–historical exposition on critique in everyday life by ordinary subjects such as those of Ẓhudāi Ẓhidmatgār, a movement launched by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, as “nothing short of revisionism at its most extreme, and daring, pinnacle” and its analysis as “imaginative” (Lawrence 2019, XX). Like Ian Almond (2018), he compares *Religion as Critique* with Shahab Ahmed’s *What is Islam?* He identifies *adab* in “its fullest meaning” as the shared ground between the two. There could be more commonalities. My immediate thought about *What is Islam?*—a rare recent book embodying the best of the classical scholarship and the length of which matches Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*—was to appreciate its theoretical ambition as well as note some fundamental differences. In ways more than one, wine is one of its important subjects. Rather than examine how it emerged historically–culturally to become pervasive and how people perform it, Ahmed took the desire for wine as a universal given. Notably, he also split the Islamic tradition to posit philosophical–Sufi amalgam in contradiction to sharia Islam. This binary was mapped temporally, linguistically, as well as spatially: Arab (Arabic) versus Balkan-to-Bengal (mainly Farsi). I disagree with both.

Since Ahmed’s book entails a separate discussion, I want to conclude with Lawrence’s description of Ahmed and me as “Muslim scholars.” It is no secret that many anthropologists were devout Christians: Mary Douglas, Evans-Pritchard, Margaret Mead, and Victor Turner, to mention only some (Larson 2014). None is described as a Christian scholar in the same way as M. N. Srinivas and G. S. Ghurye (the “father” of Indian sociology) are not called Hindu sociologists, whereas the pre-fix “Muslim” is added in names like Irfan Ahmad or similar sounding names—Ansari, Fatima, Hasan, Mohammad and the like. Are presence and absence of such prefixes part of the project of world-(un)making connected to secular–religious dualism, Western reason, and the Enlightenment?

I raise this question in the sense of *adab* (as politeness/etiquette), and which Lawrence so beautifully captures. In that spirit, let me say, *ādāb ‘arḻ* (greetings) to my interlocutors and readers alike! Let us greet *naqd/tanqīd* so as to examine the regnant doxa of the Enlightenment as critique.

## Acknowledgments

I thank Talal Asad, Sana Ghazi, and Salah Punathil for reading a draft of this response.

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## Notes

1. If so, was Islam part of Hegel's present? He held that "Islam has long vanished from the stage of history at large..." (1914, 374). Curiously, as a discipline, anthropology—whose practitioner I am—was/is committed to the past, to study "the primitive" before and outside the modern/present.
2. The essay concludes how critique is bound up with "What is the *Aufklärung*"—a phrase that could have been the "title of my conference" (Foucault 2007a, 67).
3. The introduction and conclusion to Said's book were titled, respectively, as "Secular Criticism" and "Religious Criticism."
4. If the passage where critique followed by *tanqīd/naqd* in brackets gives such an impression, let me cite it.

Without fully accounting for this constellation alluded to above, we cannot adequately understand even the widely agreed common minimum notion of critique (*tanqīd/naqd*) in South Asian Urdu/Islamic tradition—to assess (*jāñchnā/parakhnā*) or to distinguish between original and fake, good and bad or not so good. (xiv)

There I mean to stress the book's comparative pursuit. Importantly, I do not use the word "translate."

5. This term is Hugh Gusterson's coinage and follows Arjun Appadurai's description of various scapes in *Modernity at Large*; see Albro et al. (2012, 11, 13n2).
6. In 2017, Junaid, an Indian *hafiz* was publicly lynched on account of being a Muslim. When Junaid's uneducated mother, Saira, heard about his murder, unlike political pundits, she did not say that populism or intolerance had killed him. She mostly cried. "Can democracy, then, understand the tears and moaning through which Saira spoke?" (Ahmad 2017b). Such questions seem more radical than Houria Bouteldja's who Fernando cites. In the very act of refusing to answer, "can Muslim women be feminists," Bouteldja nonetheless makes feminism the pivot of her refusal to restage its centrality.
7. To Fernando's point that I do not distinguish among *tanqīd*, *naqd*, and *intiqād*. Chapter 3 spells out that while *naqd* is exclusively used in Arabic and *intiqād* in Farsi, in Urdu all three words are used, *tanqīd* being the most prevalent one.

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