Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors

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*I*n studying contemporary movements and trends in Islam, recent Western scholarship has been asking how to conceptualize Islam itself, for only then can one speak of the issues of the authenticity, continuity, and legitimacy of Islamism—issues that are being fervently debated in contemporary polemics about the Muslim world. The orientalists, the conventional authorities on Islam, have been accused of being essentialist and insensitive to the change, negotiation, development, and diversity that characterizes lived Islam. Some scholars, primarily anthropologists, have responded to the tendency to essentialize by giving up the idea of conceptualizing one "Islam" and instead have focused their inquiry on what they call various "local islams." Others have focused on sociological or political-economic approaches in explaining the modern forms of political and social activism among Muslims to the exclusion of "scriptural" Islam from their analysis.

One early influential model for anthropological studies of world religions was proposed by Robert Redfield, who in 1956 suggested that all world religions can be divided into "great tradition" and "little tradition." The great tradition, he argued, is reflective, orthodox, textual, "consciously cultivated and handed down," while the little tradition is heterodox, peripheral, local, popular, and unreflective.[1] The great-and-little-tradition dichotomy arose out of the attempt to understand the social organization of tradition, which was considered inevitable in all complex societies. Anthropology, with its beginnings in the study of the primitive and the exotic, was thought of as being concerned only with the little, local traditions, though many have long challenged both this dichotomy of tradition and the biases that stem from it.[2]

The first significant anthropological study focusing explicitly on Islam was Clifford Geertz's *Islam Observed*.[3] The influence of Geertz's textual hermeneutic approach was felt heavily both inside the discipline of anthropology and, more important, outside it.[4] Impatient with the textual focus of the orientalists who attempted to find a single Islam in scriptures and

1. Quoted in Ronald Lukens-Bull, "Between Text and Practice: Considerations in the Anthropological Study of Islam," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 4 (1999): 4.

2. John R. Bowens, "Discursive Monotheisms," *American Ethnologist* 20 (1993): 185–90; Dale F. Eickelman, "The Study of Islam in Local Contexts," *Contributions to Asian Studies* 17 (1982): 1–18.

3. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (1968; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

4. William H. Sewell Jr., "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation," in "The Fate of 'Culture': Geertz and Beyond," special issue, *Representations* 59 (1997): 35–55.

texts, he studied Muslim societies to observe Islam as it was actually lived.[5] With the increasing sophistication of anthropological inquiries, the difficulty of relating the orientalists' studies of a single, universal Islam to ethnographer's diverse, local observations of Muslim practices was becoming increasingly obvious. Abdul Hamid el-Zein, in a highly insightful survey of the field, pointed out various attempts to conceptualize Islam—most of which maintained the great-and-little-tradition dichotomy. El-Zein began by evaluating the major attempts to conceptualize Islam by that time in the discipline of anthropology, a summary of which is in order. Vincent Crapanzano had looked at the Hamadsha, a Sufi order in Morocco, from a Freudian perspective and characterized religion as a "sublimation and expression of instinctual conflicts," and the ulema (the great tradition) as "formulating this process in a formal, incontestable way."[6] A. S. Bujra, in a study of Yemen, viewed Islam as an instrumental ideology, with the elite as its creators and the masses as its consumers. Michael Gilsenan, in his study of Sufi orders in Egypt, viewed Islam from a Weberian perspective as an ideology that rationalized a certain order, with the scripturalist Islam of the ulema as a formal and systematized version of the ideology and Sufi Islam as its complementary charismatic manifestation. Dale Eickelman's study of maraboutism in Morocco adds a historical dimension to a basically Weberian perspective—and emphasizes continuous social change as being the result of perceived dissonance between symbolic ideals and social reality. In a later article, Eickelman suggested that there is a major theoretical need for taking up the "middle ground" between the study of village or tribal Islam and that of universal Islam.[7]

El-Zein's own contribution was a great act of leveling: all *islams*, to an anthropologist, were created equal, and anyone who tried to look for any hierarchy or truth-value in various islams was trading in theology, he contended, and not in anthropology. Little traditions were no different from great ones.

The thrust of el-Zein's conversation was with Geertz, and while el-Zein accepts much of Geertz's ideas, he sees that Geertz, too, was ultimately seduced by the idea of an essentialized universal Islam. He points out that to Geertz

> all expressions of Islam find unity of meaning through two dimensions of these universal conditions: first as expressions of a particular form of experience, religion, with certain defined characteristics such as the integration of world view and ethos; and second as an historically continuous tradition of meaning in which the original expression and all those following it in time and space do not exist as complete distinct realities but as delicately related development of an initial symbolic base linked by the social process of shared meaning. Islam is seen in terms of Wittgenstein's family resemblances. There is less order than in a trend within a single tradition. . . . Each individual experience contains the universal characteristics assigned to the religious form of experience and those particular shared meanings which recall an entire tradition of Islam.[8]

It is noteworthy here that Geertz sees Islam as comprising of two dimensions, experience and tradition. Also, he notes that there is "less order than in a trend within a single tradition" without explaining how much heterogeneity is allowed in a single tradition—a certain amount of homogeneity of some kind is nonetheless presumed. This problem is be taken up later, for it is critical to the approach proposed in this study.

5. As Robert Launay points out, Geertz's was far from being the first anthropological study to focus on the Muslim societies, and there existed a few studies that focused on various forms of religion in those societies—but that focus was always oblique: "Anthropologists were expected to study specific 'cultures' or 'societies' situated in some precise, and usually exotic, corner of the globe. 'Religion' in one form or another was conceived to be an essential component of such a culture or society. If some or all of the members of this culture happened to be Muslim, it was likely that the anthropologist would have something to say about Islam in that particular locality. Indeed, such a discussion might be essential to any comprehensive description." Robert Launay, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2. Geertz's *Islam Observed*, Launay adds, was the first anthropological monograph to break away from this tradition and explicitly address the issue of Islam.

6. Abdul Hamid el-Zein, "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 227–54; quotation on 243. The studies summarized and critiqued by el-Zein are A. S. Bujra, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971); Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon,1973); D. F. Eickelman, *Moroccan Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); and Geertz, *Islam Observed*.

7. Eickelman, "Study of Islam in Local Contexts."

8. El-Zein, "Beyond Ideology and Theology," 232.

El-Zein insightfully recognizes the challenge of the anthropologist taking a phenomenological, or symbolic, approach, which is that she or he inevitably

> focuses on the daily lived experience of the local Islam and leaves the study of theological interpretation to the Islamists. Therefore, he [the anthropologist] faces the problem of grasping meanings which are fluid and indeterminant [*sic*]. He must stabilize these meanings in order to understand them and communicate them to others. Symbols then become finite and well-bounded containers of thought, and at the moment of analysis the continuous production of meaning is stopped. Meaning becomes static through its objectification in the symbol.[9]

El-Zein's own solution to this problem was to stop looking for any search for structure or unifying factors among various local islams. While this position has been much discussed and often adopted in subsequent literature, the present study suggests that both the complexity and limitations of el-Zein's proposal have been underestimated.

It appears that el-Zein has taken an anthropologist's task to be the study of immediate, local experiences, that is, to analyze what precisely is going on in the minds of the subjects as they experience religion or ritual. If this indeed is the task, then it is no wonder it is rather difficult to accomplish it, and perhaps impossible to report it. As he himself argues, each expression of Islam creates its own web of meaning, and any attempt at synthesis will throw "a web of frozen points of meaning" over the otherwise fluid, dynamic web of meaning that the subject inhabits.[10] No wonder his conclusion is rather dismal: anthropology of Islam is simply not possible, because Islam cannot be located as an analytical object.

The problem underlying el-Zein's conclusion that Islam cannot be located as an anthropological category is that he sought to study Islam in all the wrong places: in the fluid imaginations of the worshippers and believers.

But a possibility that el-Zein does not consider is that the anthropology of Islam can be located elsewhere. Since even the most uninhibited religious experience is never free of constraints and structures put in place by a past, that is, by a tradition, understanding the tradition that guides and defines that religious experience is what could be more fruitfully sought.

El-Zein's suggestion that the idea of a single Islam must be abandoned in fact smacks of a deceptively similar idea in the case of totemism. Robert Launay in a recent study points out that after working with the idea of totemism in explaining exotic societies for decades, the anthropologists realized that "'totemism' was really an invention of anthropologists, an amalgam of unrelated traits that tended to occur separately more often than together. It was an artifact of academic discourse rather than of the exotic cultures the anthropologists purported to describe."[11] But Islam, obviously, is no totemism, Launay observes, chiefly because "real people all over the world freely identify themselves as Muslims; few, I daresay, call themselves 'totemists.'"[12] Admittedly, self-identification of subjects is not sufficient to prove a label's usefulness. But, as Launay points out, the unity of a single Islam is a consciously theological aspect of what Muslims believe, despite the fact that Muslims are at least as aware of the diversity of interpretation and practice of Islam as are Western anthropologists. Launay contends that "for anthropologists to assert the existence of multiple Islams is, in essence, to make a theological claim, one most Muslims would not only deny but, they rightfully argue, anthropologists have no business making."[13] Launay attributes the tendency of anthropologists to take diversity for multiplicity as a result of a methodological and historical proclivity toward local, "traditional" cultures, in which religion is analyzed as an integral component of a locality's culture and a reflection of its underlying social relationships.[14] This approach, he observes, might be equally misleading in the

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9. Ibid., 242.

10. Ibid., 250.

11. Launay, *Beyond the Stream*, 4.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 5.

14. Interestingly, Launay hesitatingly uses the term *traditional*, in quotes, to refer to what used to be called the "primitive" local cultures that anthropologists started out as being most interested in. This replacement of primitive or nonrational with traditional points to what tradition has come to mean: unthinking reproduction. This tendency is precisely the target of investigation in this article.

case of local cultures and religions, but its insufficiency is glaring in the case of universal religions such as Islam. And since he recognizes that "Islam is obviously not a 'product' of any specific local community, but rather a global entity in itself," Launay comes to the same problem statement as my own in this study: "The problem for anthropologists is to find a framework in which to analyze the relationship between this single, global entity, Islam, and the multiple entities that are the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims in specific communities at specific moments in history."[15]

It is at this point in their analysis of this tension that not only Launay but also many other critical anthropologists, and indeed scholars of other disciplines who face the same problem, come to recognize the usefulness of the conceptual framework proposed by Talal Asad.[16] Asad—a leading cultural anthropologist and postcolonialist thinker—suggested that the diversity in various local manifestations of Islam be organized through the concept of a "discursive tradition."

Geertz, according to this approach, was partly right in pointing out the two dimensions of what he called religion, namely, experience and tradition (it is the neat separation of the two that Asad takes issue with). At the same time, it agrees with el-Zein in rejecting Geertz's essentialization of an "Islamic consciousness" at the level of an actual experience. So while one cannot analytically define a particularly Islamic religious experience (as Geertz attempts to do) or Islamic social structures (as Ernest Gellner, for instance, does), one can speak of Islamic discursive constraints and tradition—precisely because one can speak of a set of well-defined and universally accepted foundational texts and interpretive techniques in Islam.

Less fierce but more forceful, less aggressive but more challenging, than Edward Said in his famous *Orientalism*, Asad has not only questioned orientalism, but, unlike Said, has also

worked at providing a better alternative framework for the study of Islam. Asad's critique of Gellner's idea of "Islam as a blueprint of a social order" is devastating, his rejection of el-Zein's localism is total, and his response to Eickelman's suggestion that the problem of conceptualizing Islam be solved by finding a middle ground between great and little traditions is that "the most urgent theoretical need for an anthropology of Islam is a matter not so much of finding the right scale but of formulating the right concepts." "A discursive tradition," he argues, "is just such a concept."[17] While Geertz had alluded earlier to the idea of a religion such as Islam consisting of experience and a tradition of meaning, his notion of religion as well as that of tradition has been seriously called into question by Asad, who has persuasively argued that *religion* as a neatly separable aspect of social life is a modern Western construct and, as such, not an adequate concept to describe Islam, or even premodern Christianity for that matter.[18]

At the heart of Asad's critique of Geertz and his proposition that Islam be seen as a discursive tradition is the question of power. Asad's trenchant critique flies in the face of most of the earlier anthropological conceptualizations of Islam, because they tend to imagine Islam as a religion in the modern Western sense of the word. The modern enterprise of defining a universal category *religion* as "an autonomous essence," which is transhistorical and transcultural, is a reflection of the liberal demand that religion be separate from the spheres of real power and reason such as politics, law, and science.[19] Accordingly, Geertz has defined religion as "a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[20] The function of religion, in other words, is to induce a certain distinctive set of dis-

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15. Launay, *Beyond the Stream*, 6. As I argue later, this is not the only problem that arises from the negation of a translocal, universal Islam.

16. For example, Robert Hefner, Richard Eaton, Charles Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood, Salwa Ismail, and Gregory Starrett, to name a few.

17. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14.

18. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 28.

19. Ibid.

20. Geertz, quoted in ibid.

positions, and a worldview (theology), which is, Geertz explains elsewhere, essentially different from science or common sense. Through a discerning investigation of medieval Christianity, Asad raises a number of points that challenge Geertz's definition: (1) to a Christian believer, for example, religious symbols may possess truth independent of their effectiveness in magically inducing certain dispositions; (2) it is not mere symbols but forms of power that implant true Christian dispositions—power as embodied in law, knowledge (such as punishment in the afterlife), and disciplinary activities of social institutions (family, church, etc.) and the human body (fasting, prayer, penance, etc.); and (3) Geertz's assertion elsewhere that the said religious symbols that induce certain dispositions also place these dispositions in a cosmic framework—thus theological discourse being an immediate and inevitable consequence of these symbols—is also rejected by Asad. Besides being demonstrably incorrect, in that the religious dispositions and the discourse are not always inherently and mechanically connected, this claim ignores the disciplines of power involved in making this connection work. Drawing once again on medieval Christian discourse, Asad says,

> It was the early Christian Fathers who established the principle that only a single Church could become the source of authenticating discourse. They knew that the "symbols" embodied in the practice of self-confessed Christians are not always identical with the theory of the "one true Church," that religion requires authorized practice and authorizing doctrine, and that there is always a tension between them—sometimes breaking into heresy, the subversion of Truth—which underlines the creative role of institutional power.[21]

Geertz's neat separation of the efficacy of the religious symbols from the social and psychological context, as if these symbols were magical, leads him to assert that "the anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological

processes."[22] Asad's contention is, again, that these two stages are in essence one: religious symbols acquire their meaning and efficacy in real life through social and political means and processes in which power, in the form of coercion, discipline, institutions, and knowledge, is intricately involved.

This correction to Geertz's concept of religion is important, not the least because once religion is understood as a (disposable) perspective separable from real life, it becomes possible to construe it as merely a language, a mental opiate to aestheticize the brutalities of real life. Thus, Gellner writes in his study of the Muslim societies of North Africa (and the conclusions are then generalized to the rest of the Muslim world): "Islam provided a common language and thus a certain kind of smoothness for a process which, in a more mute and brutalistic form, had been taking place anyway."[23]

In the light of this discussion, my critique of el-Zein can be restated. He equated the study of religion with a study of the "web of meanings" the religious symbols create in the minds of the believers—and neglected the role of the discursive tradition and the social and psychological means by which and the milieu within which that tradition influences the dispositions. There is yet another problem with el-Zein's denial of Islam outside of the subject's minds that has often not been pointed out. From the anthropological viewpoint, negating or neglecting an Orthodox tradition (by "Orthodox" here, I simply wish to emphasize the translocal, networked aspect of the Islamic tradition) disables the questions of diachronic change, revival, reform, and intercultural but intra-Islam dialog, which are perhaps some of the most interesting and relevant questions to ask about Muslim societies today. I address the implications of this oversight a bit later.

Of course, the idea of a tradition of meaning has been around in Western scholarship before Asad's suggestion in 1986; Asad's ingenuity lay in his reworking of the idea of tradition and using it so aptly to go past the theoretical bottleneck that had clogged anthropological inquiries with problems they had themselves conjured up.

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21. Ibid., 38–39.

22. Ibid., 53.

23. Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology*, 8.

But the concept of tradition had to be tidied up before it could become usable. Whereas Geertz had seen tradition as emanating from religious symbols (a process in which the subjects do not reason or argue), Michael Gilsenan, in his otherwise quite sensitive study *Recognizing Islam*, sees tradition in an exact opposite way: a ruse, a manipulative ideology. He writes,

> Tradition, therefore, is put together in all manner of different ways in contemporary conditions of crisis; it is a term that is in fact highly variable and shifting in content. It changes, though all who use it do so to mark out truths and principles as essentially unchanging. In the name of tradition many traditions are born and come into opposition with others. It becomes a language, a weapon against internal and external enemies, a refuge, an evasion, or part of the entitlement to domination and authority over others.[24]

This tension recalls a widespread debate in the literature about contemporary Islam: between those who see the Islamic tradition (culture) as a determining force, and thus potentially limit the agency of those inhabiting the tradition, and those who see the cultural tradition as a ruse, utterly subordinate to sociological, political, or economic considerations. This latter view, however, neglects the power of tradition, that is, the role of constraints and limitations imposed by the past that is embodied in a tradition, which become effective partly because of the genuine convictions the subjects may have toward that tradition even when possibly putting it to self-serving uses. Both of these extremes make the concept of tradition itself irrelevant for analysis; Asad's idea of a discursive tradition is designed to avoid precisely that.

What Is a Discursive Tradition?

While the idea that Islam is a tradition—a set of beliefs and practices handed down from the past that go all the way back to the prophet Muhammad—seems rather commonsensical and

even banal, how can it account for revolutionary, critically reflective, modernist, or generally "untraditional" claims of many contemporary Muslims? If tradition is simply a replication of the past, can it be modern, rationally critical, or forward-looking?

The answer ought to begin with a serious rethinking of the concept of *tradition*. Fortunately several studies in the past few decades in disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy have called into question the modern prejudice that tradition must always be in ontological opposition to rationality and negotiation.[25] No longer should tradition be considered "a set of unchanging doctrinal or cultural givens"; rather as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, it is a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her own good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part."[26]

Talal Asad brings to the anthropology of Islam his own rethinking of the concept of tradition in his various works, beginning with his seminal "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" in 1986. He sees the basic function of tradition as establishing orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a given historical and material context: "A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history."[27] Traditional discourses are not merely nostalgic: they relate to a past (when the authentic practice was instituted) and a future (how a correct performance and its fruits can be secured in future) through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions).

24. Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: An Anthropologist's Introduction* (London: Croom Helm; New York: Pantheon, 1983), 15.

25. To name a few: Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Alasdiar MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

26. Alasdiar MacIntyre, quoted in Samira Haj, "Reordering Islamic Orthodoxy: Muhammad Ibn 'Abdul Wahhab," *Muslim World* 92 (2002): 335.

27. Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology*, 14.

Islam as a Discursive Tradition

As a religion-cum-worldview with a relatively clearly defined set of foundational texts and an established history of reasoned arguments based on these texts, Islam lends itself rather naturally to the concept of discursive tradition. The Islamic discursive tradition is therefore understood as a "historically evolving set of discourses, embodied in the practices and institutions of Islamic societies and hence deeply imbricated in the material life of those inhabiting them."[28] As such, the Islamic discursive tradition is characterized by its own rationality or styles of reasoning—couched in its texts, history, and institutions. This is not to say that there is some rationality, logic, or philosophy essentially Islamic and thus impenetrable to the outsiders, but that certain theoretical considerations and premises emanating from the content and form of the foundational discourses (the content and context of the scriptures, the historical experience of Islam in its formative years, etc.) come to characterize the tradition, and so anyone wishing to argue within the Islamic tradition, must start with them, even if only to argue against them. A historian and Islamicist, William Graham has pointed out one such pervasive feature of Islam: its "traditionalism," or what he calls in Arabic *ittisaliya* (continuity with the past). Graham, recognizing the significance of the concept of tradition in understanding Islam, has preferred to see this traditionalism as a "deep structure" within Islam by pointing out how various Islamic traditions (subtraditions?) rely on the early Islamic experience and connectedness with the Prophetic method (*sunna*) as an argument for their authority and authenticity.[29] While agreeing largely with Graham, I prefer to see this emphasis on connectedness by these Islamic subtraditions as a conscious, rational mode of participating in an Islamic discursive tradition rather than as an unthought or unconscious deep structure waiting to be discovered by modern scholars.

To understand the existence of various kinds or styles of rationalities and standards of justice in rational traditions, it is useful here to think of MacIntyre's brilliant work on Western philosophical traditions, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* in which he argues that all rational inquiry must be couched in a tradition (MacIntyre is primarily concerned here with Western traditions of inquiry). By relating rational inquiry to its material and historical context, Talal Asad provides the converse anthropological argument that any developed tradition of discourses has its own styles of reasoning. All arguments and claims, such as definitions of orthodoxy, and claims of exclusion and inclusion, must be evaluated based on their success in the discursive process. Rather than the "thick descriptions" of theatrical subjects who simply "behave" in accordance with the roles determined for them by either their material structure or culture, it is the arguments and discourses of the *thinking* subjects with their specific styles of reasoning couched in their historical and material context that become the focus of this analysis.

The Insider/Outsider Issue

Paying attention to a discursive tradition is not to essentialize certain practices or symbols as being more authentic but to recognize that the authenticity or orthodoxy of these has to be argued for from within the tradition and embraced or rejected according to its own criteria. Nor does it mean to take the natives or practitioners of the tradition for their word and give up one's own notions of rationality, or ignore the material conditions within which the discourse takes place and focus merely on cultural factors. From the writings of Asad and others who have advocated this approach, it appears possible for the outsiders embracing a different tradition of rationality to investigate the coherence or continuity of discourses of a certain tradition, just as it is possible for them to relate the indigenous styles of reasoning to their particular social

28. Charles Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Abu Zayd," www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5–1/text/hirschkind.html (accessed 22 November 2005).

29. William A. Graham, "Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993): 495–522. Graham's central argument, supported by myriad examples from Islamic history, is that Islamic traditionalism lies in the authority of persons who transmit the tradition, "not in some imagined atavism, regressivism, fatalism, or rejection of change and challenge—especially since this same traditional *ittisaliya* has served modernists as well as reactionaries as authority for their ideas" (522). He closes with a note stating that his article has "attempted not to prove, but to offer the hypothesis that this paradigm (of traditionalism) may be seen as a 'deep structure' in those cultures linked by their Islamic impress" (522).

and historical contexts. Outsiders, for instance, may fruitfully point out the role of expedient, incongruent, or nonrational factors in shaping the discursive field. From this perspective, it is obviously legitimate for Western scholars to study and comment on contemporary Islamic discourses. Even so, there remains a caveat of which Asad suggests, just as MacIntyre would, that to discuss a discursive tradition "is to be in a certain narrative relation to it, a relation that will vary according to whether one supports or opposes the tradition, or regards it as morally neutral. The coherence that each party finds, or fails to find, in that tradition will depend on their particular historical position."[30]

Successors and Interlocutors: Applications and Tensions

To elaborate the theoretical points made so far about the proposition of construing Islam as a discursive tradition, I present, in the following, analyses of the same religious controversy in contemporary Egypt by two scholars who have, in their own ways, carried forth Asad's project.

Clashes and dialogues of the Islamic discursive tradition with a variety of Western ones have for long crowded the discursive space in the Muslim world, and an analysis of these is a fascinating field. One such case is Charles Hirschkind's skillful application of Asad's propositions to the Nasr Abu Zayd controversy in Egypt.[31] Hirschkind begins by noting that Abu Zayd's modernist attempts to subjugate Islamic modes of exegetical reasoning to a certain Western one and his advocacy of Western social and political models transgressed boundaries considered Islamically acceptable by his contemporaries. Abu Zayd, claiming his writings to be objective and scientific, is in fact employing the realism of an archaic tradition of Western sociology and attempting to account for the Islamic scriptures in purely instrumental and secular terms. This leads him to practically deny the divine origin of the Koran—a belief that has been the cornerstone of otherwise widely varying expressions of Islam.

Hirschkind analyses Abu Zayd's arguments as well as some responses by his detractors and suggests that although Abu Zayd's arguments have clear signs of incoherence and selective borrowing from some now largely obsolete Western social models, what is interesting is that his Islamic detractors also often fall short of coherently articulating an Islamic position and take aspects of modernity for granted. Hirschkind argues that these discursive limitations are connected to "the dependent positions within the structures of world capital" that countries like Egypt occupy.[32] Hence, the material condition of this clash of rationalities heavily influences, though it may not determine, the discursive possibilities.

More important, Hirschkind's analysis is about competing interpretations of Islam and attempts to define orthodoxy. Abu Zayd's formulations are far from coherent or self-reflective, Hirschkind argues, but the key problem that makes Abu Zayd's claims to Islam suspect to his detractors is his utter disregard of the Islamic tradition by denying aspects of faith deemed essential by the "reason-guided interpreters" of the foundational texts.[33] In other words, he was deemed as being outside even the most minimal demands of the long-standing Islamic tradition.

It should be noted here that Asad considers contemporary Islamist movements to be part of the Islamic tradition, as does Hirschkind elsewhere, despite these movements' calls for radical reform and rethinking of the tradition, for to him,

> belonging to a tradition doesn't preclude involvement in vigorous debate over the meanings of its formative texts (even over which texts *are* formative) and over the need for radical reform of the tradition. The selectivity with which people approach their tradition doesn't necessarily undermine their claim to its integrity. Nor does the attempt to adapt the older concerns of a tradition's followers to their new predicament in itself dissolve the coherence of that tradition—indeed that is precisely the object of argument among those who claim to be upholding the essence of the tradition.[34]

So while it seems possible for scholars to reflect on whether a certain argument lies within

30. Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology*, 17.

31. Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics."

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. On Hirschkind, see ibid. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 195.

the bounds of a given tradition, such an exercise requires a cautious dissection of the arguments of the contestants over the tradition as well as a keen awareness of the reasoning of the tradition itself. This is a very significant point, because it requires ultimately the coming together of two hitherto divergent disciplines, anthropology and the textual scholarship that has been the domain of the orientalists and cultural historians of Islam.

A contrastive example of the evaluation of the same controversy is provided by Salwa Ismail's recent book on modern Islamic trends in Egypt.[35] It begins with a penetrating survey of Western approaches to the issues of continuity and change in contemporary Islam and then finally privileges Asad's notion of construing Islam as a discursive tradition as an appropriate concept for organizing the diversity seen in various forms of Islam (16). Then Ismail goes on to take stock of some contemporary discourses in Egyptian society, particularly the Nasr Abu Zayd controversy.

Ismail observes that by deciding against Abu Zayd and forcing him to separate from his wife upon the instigation of Islamist lawyers, the modern Egyptian state became engaged with defining orthodoxy and *kufr* (disbelief or infidelity). The court ruling, she states, "proceeds by defining *kufr*, invoking the authority of medieval jurists like Ibn Hazm, and contrasting the literal 'truths' of the Qur'an with the falsehood of Abu Zayd's ideas and propositions regarding Qur'anic interpretation" (69). A number of things are curious here, such as the state's attempt to define orthodoxy upon the instigation of moderate to conservative Islamists—while the radical Islamists consider the Egyptian state essentially infidel itself. Those familiar with medieval Islamic accounts of occasional inquisitions by the military sultans upon the instigation of influential ulema against their rivals or heretics—the famous jurist Ibn Taymiyyah, often invoked in contemporary Islamist discourses, being an example—will not be surprised by a Muslim government's taking sides in theological quarrels and even executing the accused. What

is surprising is that the Egyptian government, staunchly opposed to the Islamist currents and heir to secular Arab nationalism, would today play the role played in medieval Islamic history by the Turkish military commanders seeking to appease the ulema and securing religious legitimacy by such means.

But this is not what intrigues Ismail, who is more interested in demonstrating that the state's arguments in this case, invoked on the authority of influential medieval scholars and similar to those provided by the Islamists' as well as the traditional Azharite scholars, are based on a literalist interpretation of the Koran and can be shown to be subjective, hegemonizing, and even unreasonable and irrational. She blames the reasoning of the state and the tradition for presuming that "the Truth of the Text is literal and supersedes reason and rationality; it is divorced from historical context and from time and space. The grounding of the truth in the Text understood in these terms is precisely what Abu Zayd's writings sought to challenge" (69). Speaking of her own interpretive approach, she states, "An important premise is that there are no inherent meanings to the text. Thus, to share or make use of the same frames of reference does not result in agreement on substantive meaning or positive content" (17).

She does not explain why her relativistic premise that the scripture carries no inherent meaning must become the standard by which orthodoxy in the Islamic tradition is to be evaluated. True, this determinacy of the text precisely is what Nasr Abu Zayd sought to challenge—and it is precisely because such arguments undercut the divine nature of the Koranic text and the roots of the Islamic faith, or so Abu Zayd's opponents argue—that he was considered outside the pale of orthodox Islam.

Ismail's evaluation of the state of the discourse, its tensions and contradictions, and, most important, the questions she deems worthy of asking about the tradition, seem to have been shaped by her personal persuasions. This is precisely what Asad foresaw when proposing this kind of analysis, as noted earlier: to write

35. Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003). Subsequent page references cited parenthetically.

about a tradition is to enter into a discursive relationship with it, and the scholar's evaluation of a tradition cannot escape her normative view of it. But this inevitable subjectiveness must not become an excuse for partisan scholarship and theologizing under the guise of scholarship. Those who do not agree with a scholar's premises or evaluation of a tradition may still benefit from her appraisal of it so long as it is sufficiently self-critical—or else there would be no value to any scholarship besides theology, and the business of analyzing discourses would be reduced to theological polemics.[36]

How then must one approach traditions that one does not subscribe to? Another suggestion of Asad's that emerges from his critique of Gellner's positivist approach to issues of cultural translation in a different context is of key significance here. Gellner has criticized anthropologists such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Edmund Leach for being too tolerant and charitable toward the primitive cultures' "pre-logical" ways of thinking and seeking to find meanings where there are none. In his essay on issues of translations in British anthropology, Asad objects to Gellner's critique as being incoherent and insensitive to the power differential involved in the exercise of cultural translation that could distort the culture being studied. He argues quite cogently that a scholar must exercise extra caution in translating concepts from other traditions into one's own because the subjects one is writing about are not present in the conversation to contest the author's formulations. A remedy to this problem is to seek coherence in the other cultures' (or traditions') discourses, as most sensitive anthropologists have advocated, rather than seek reasons to dismiss it as pre-logical based on one's own assumptions.[37] This insight provides another way to compare Ismail's analysis of the Abu Zayd controversy with Hirschkind's.

Ismail's treatment of the same controversy contrasts sharply with Hirschkind's, and the difference cannot be attributed simply to the two scholars' varying positions with respect to the controversy. As a critical Western anthropologist, Hirschkind seems unpersuaded by Abu Zayd's subjection of the Koranic text's meanings to archaic positivist sociology. Deconstructing Abu Zayd's particular usage of the concepts of history and social context, Hirschkind points out that these concepts are not universal and therefore do not carry the irresistible force of logic that the Islamic tradition must give in to. He recognizes, instead, as Asad has done elsewhere, that each tradition has its own styles of reasoning, and Abu Zayd's propositions are simply not coherent with the classical Islamic tradition: in other words, they do violate the limits upheld by the Islamic tradition. In fact, Abu Zayd himself would not be surprised by this conclusion: he intended precisely to challenge the tradition and considered attacks against him inappropriate, not because they misunderstood his stance vis-à-vis the tradition, but because "they [the Islamists] want to link religious apostasy with the crime of betraying the nation; and so, they ignore an essential distinction: the freedom of human beings to choose their religion—a freedom upheld by the Qur'an—and 'treason' aimed at harming the modern nation for the benefit of its enemies."[38] So while Ismail is at pains to show the fluidity or indeterminacy of the Islamic orthodoxy, Abu Zayd seems to be aiming at challenging that very orthodoxy rather than invoking its "fluidity."

Both Ismail and Hirschkind recognize the connection of power and orthodoxy in the course of charting this controversy. Hirschkind brings out the looming global presence of modern constructs such as the secular state as having become part of the conversation about orthodoxy in Islam, a presence that even the keepers of the Islamic tradition do not and perhaps cannot easily challenge. Ismail shows the constructedness of orthodoxy in contemporary Egypt by showing changing focuses of Islamist discourses, from the demands of God's rule in the 1970s to those of an Islamically moral public sphere in the 1990s (the latter being more state accommodating). While she acknowledges that "devices established during the first two centuries of Islam for excluding and maginalis-

36. I do not mean to imply that Ismail's insightful work is merely partisan polemics—and while her taking sides influences her analysis, hers still remains one of the more insightful recent works on the subject.

37. Asad, *Genealogies*, 171–99.

38. Abu Zayd, quoted in Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics."

ing views that lay outside the boundaries of orthodoxy are part of the tradition within which the Islamists situate themselves," the majority of her focus is to emphasize the choice the Islamists have had in selectively manipulating these devices.[39] Her analysis also shows the interaction of the coercive power—the state—with the construction of orthodoxy. The suppression by the Egyptian state of the early Islamist movements that demanded Islamic rule, thus directly threatening the state, has resulted in a shifted focus of the Islamist discourses (or simply a different means of Islamizing the society, the Islamists may argue) in which the state's presence can be accommodated, even if with varying degrees of uneasiness. The accommodations made by the state in the process, however, are no less significant, as the state's role in Nasr Abu Zayd's controversy shows.

Power and Orthodoxy

The difference between the two approaches, that of Hirschkind and that of Ismail, however, is not merely a matter of differing personal preferences, but can be understood as resulting from a tension, or ambiguity, that exists within Asad's elaboration of the idea of discursive tradition itself. On the one hand Asad has cogently argued against suggestion that anthropologists must concede to the idea of multiple islams, and that to do so would be a reductive relativism that would justifiably unsettle both the Islamologists and the Muslims themselves. He insists instead that the scholars should pay attention to the Muslims' discursive relationship to the foundational texts, because that is where all Muslims begin. On the other hand his idea that orthodoxy is merely a relation of power faces the hazard of being interpreted in precisely the same way that he had set out to argue against.[40] Salwa Ismail for instance, and others, while accepting Asad's terminology, have used his proposal that orthodoxy equals power in a way that seems to contradict the basic idea proposed by Asad—the assertion of a discursive tradition centered around the foundational texts.[41]

I contend that Ismail's use of Asad's concept of orthodoxy in a discursive tradition is not fully coherent or in keeping with a fuller understanding of Asad's work. Asad's concept of orthodoxy-as-power is essentially an anthropological concept, not to be confused with Islam's translocal and "networked" concept of religious Orthodoxy. Asad's own contention of the centrality of certain foundational texts of Islam points to his recognition of an Orthodoxy within Islam, indicated here with a capital *O*, as opposed to the doctrines and practices that come to be considered as "orthodoxy" in any given locality through workings of local power, indicated with a lowercase *o*.

This apparent or real tension in Asad's formulations has led many to emphasize one aspect to the exclusion of the other. For instance, one anthropologist, Ronald Lukens-Bull, understands Asad's attempts to rehabilitate the concept of orthodoxy in the study of cultures as a theological attempt to privilege the Koran- and Hadith-centered Islam as being the only orthodox one. Somewhat anachronistically, Lukens-Bull states that el-Zein's criticisms were directed at the likes of Asad who claims for both theology and anthropology a higher status than folk expressions of Islam. In what seems to be a case of misunderstanding, Lukens-Bull sharply declares that "Asad is wrong in wanting anthropologists to declare which form of Islam is 'more real.'"[42] Admittedly, Asad asserts that "if one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith."[43] But this Asad says in his rejection of Gellner's idea of Islam as a

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39. Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics*, 17.

40. In a personal communication dated 28 June 2005, Asad showed uneasiness toward the way his concept of power has often been interpreted: "But unfortunately many people have misunderstood this to mean 'force' or 'repression,' but I think you understand it properly (and certainly the rest of 'Genealogies' makes it clear) that for me power includes 'potentiality'—the ability to DO something (including doing something to oneself)."

41. See, e.g., Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Richard Eaton, ed., introduction to *India's Islamic Traditions, 711–175.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

42. Lukens-Bull, "Between Text and Practice," 7.

43. Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology,* 14.

complete "blueprint for a social order" on the one hand and el-Zein's declaration of all islams being equally valid on the other. Asad's attempt is not to define an orthodox Islam but to say that the fact that Islam cannot be located in a social order does not mean it is nothing more than a label for disparate and contradictory claims by various Muslim cultures. Muslims do all agree—to the extent that an agreement is possible in a complex world tradition—to begin somewhere, even if, from an anthropological viewpoint, the agreement ends there. Asad seems to be pointing to a distinctive feature of the Islamic discursive tradition (well known to the historians and specialists of Islam, as noted earlier), which is a relationship to the Koran and Hadith—and it is an altogether different matter that this relationship is not determinative but interpretive. Reification of Islam is not possible, Asad says, because it is not a fixed social system but rather, from an anthropological viewpoint, a relationship with certain foundational texts and a particular historical narrative of their origins. This understanding helps avoid the essentialist attempt to reconstruct true Islamic order merely through philological studies of medieval texts and rehabilitates the living, thinking, and arguing subject without ignoring these texts. This subject, a Muslim, by definition relates to these texts through interpretation, argument, and even manipulation but may authentically construct a variety of social and political understandings. While not everything said or done by Muslims is part of an authoritative Islamic discourse, it is not limited to the juristic or theological disputations among the specialists. Increasingly, especially with the coming of the printing press and now the Internet, ordinary Muslims contribute to the discourse about what is correct Islamic belief or practice.[44]

At the heart of Lukens-Bull's objection lies his misunderstanding of Asad's conception of orthodoxy and its connection with power. Another emerging scholar, M. Brett Wilson, seems to have understood Asad's project better when he says that Asad's attempt to introduce the concept of orthodoxy to discussions of Islam is basically predicated on power.[45] Wilson looks at Asad's position in a long-standing debate among Western scholars as to whether there is such thing as orthodoxy in Islam and points out that distinguished orientalists such as Montgomery Watt and William Cantwell Smith and anthropologists such as Dale Eickelman have asserted that there is no orthodoxy in Islam because there is no formal clergy or religious center. He argues that this absence is noted in comparison with Christianity, in which the presence of orthodoxy is presumed often without argument or scrutiny. But, he suggests, even before Protestantism and mid-eleventh-century divisions in the Church, the Christian orthodoxy was never absolute or universal (e.g., Monophysite, Arian, Donatist). It is more reasonable to start with the expectation that an overarching and absolute orthodoxy, which he calls "meta-orthodoxy," is not likely to be maintained in any long-standing and complex religious tradition. This recognition makes it possible to meaningfully search for orthodoxy in the Islamic discursive tradition. A scholar of Islamic law, Sherman Jackson has similarly noted that scholars like Watt have taken differences in the mechanisms via which Islam seeks to regulate theological discourse in contrast with Christianity to conclude that the former has no such mechanisms.[46]

Wilson notes that Asad has drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's work on doxa (doctrine) in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, which defines orthodoxy as "the dominant discourse" that protects "the official way of thinking and speaking the world."[47] Juxtaposing the two opinions on the issue of orthodoxy in Islam, Wilson prefers Asad's approach over those who deny a possibility of any orthodoxy in Islam by showing the absence of an absolute metaorthodoxy. But Asad's acceptance of it, he points out, is far from straightforward, for Asad "minimizes the impor-

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44. Several scholars have recently studied the translocal, networked, and hence global nature of Islam and the influence of recent developments including the Web on these networks. See miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

45. M. Brett Wilson, "The Problem of Orthodoxy in Islamic Studies" (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion National Conference, Philadelphia, 2005).

46. Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Faysal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30.

47. Wilson, "The Problem of Orthodoxy in Islamic Studies."

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tance of theological positions on orthodoxy and in its stead focuses on the sociological production and continuation of orthodoxy."[48] While Wilson concurs with Asad in that orthodoxy is a relation of power and it is therefore possible for multiple orthodoxies to exist, he suggests that there is more to orthodoxy in Islam than what Asad proposes. He further argues that Asad has underestimated the significance of practice in shaping the doctrine and has focused only on the reverse. This particular objection, however, seems to have been based on a limited reading of Asad.[49] It may be argued in response that practice has no agency of articulation of its own, and it, too, participates in the discourse through interpretations and arguments brought forth by the practitioners and may be subsumed under the analysis of the material context of the discourse.

The earlier point raised by Wilson, that Asad minimizes the importance of theological positions, needs to be fleshed out further. Asad's peculiar use of the concept of orthodoxy is summed up in his recommendation:

> Orthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic traditions. But the sense in which I use this term must be distinguished from the sense given to it by most Orientalists and anthropologists. Anthropologists like El-Zein, who wish to deny any special significance to orthodoxy, and those like Gellner, who see it as a specific set of doctrines "at the heart of Islam," both are missing something vital: that orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy. The way these powers are exercised, the conditions that make them possible (social, political, economic, etc.), and the resistances they encounter (from Muslims and non-Muslims) are equally the concern of an anthropology of Islam, regardless of whether its direct object of research is in the city or in the countryside, in the present or in the past. Argument and conflict over the form and significance of

practices are therefore a natural part of any Islamic tradition.[50]

But even if orthodoxy is not "a mere" body of opinion, it is still a body of opinion or an acceptable range thereof—one that any local attempt to establish orthodoxy cannot remain indifferent to. An anthropological understanding of orthodoxy in any locality and in any religious tradition as being essentially predicated on power does not explain the original problem of the relationship between the translocal Islamic Orthodoxy and the various local orthodoxies. To put this tension another way: granted that orthodoxy is a "relationship of power," the question remains how it comes to be established as one set of doctrines and not another. Is the content of orthodoxy merely a product of the local cultural and social or politico-economic conditions? Asad's entire formulation of the idea of Islam as a discursive tradition begins with a rejection of such a position.[51] I have also pointed earlier to Launay's cogent criticism of such a view of orthodoxy as being crude and theologically intrusive. Hirschkind also points to the existence of the continuity across time in "those aspects deemed essential by reason-guided interpreters of the textual tradition"—and this continuity is indeed valid across various Muslim cultures as well inasmuch as they draw on the same texts and interpretive traditions.[52] Even Ismail concedes to a conception of orthodoxy when she points out that certain devices emerged during the first two centuries of Islam that constituted the Orthodoxy. It is a different matter that she simultaneously argues, in what appears to be a reformist theological vein, that such past interpretations should place no constraints on the meaning of the scripture today or that the scripture has no inherent meanings of its own.[53]

Asad's central idea of a discursive tradition with its characteristic styles of reasoning implies that there exist some translocal criteria defining Orthodoxy in Islam, but he never explicitly theorizes the relationship of this Ortho-

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48. Ibid.

49. This is a reasonable assumption, for Wilson has cited only one article by Asad, written in 1986, and no reference is made to the latter's later works that elaborate on related themes.

50. Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology,* 15–16.

51. Ibid., 2.

52. Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics."

53. Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics,* 17.

doxy with the local orthodoxies. The idea of a rational discursive tradition implies that certain interpretations and transformations are legitimate while others are not, regardless of the attempts of local powers to assert otherwise. Even wide acceptance of certain practices in a given locality and their enforcement by local religious and political authorities cannot free them fully of the Islamic Orthodox judgment.

Hence if the problem had been to solve or transcend the tension between the great-and-little-tradition dichotomy, then Asad's task remains somewhat unfinished until the (apparent?) tension between a single discursive tradition and multiple local orthodoxies is theorized.

The absence of an explicit theorization of this relationship in Asad's formulation has led some of his successors to neglect exploring the implications of a global Orthodox tradition or deny its relevance. Richard Eaton's reference to Asad in explaining divergent and syncretic practices in India is one example where a partial and potentially mistaken use of Asad's ideas has been made in order to essentially support a relativistic kind of claim that would accord more with el-Zein than with Asad.[54]

A much more extensive use of Asad's interpretive toolset is made by Gregory Starrett in his *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt.* Starrett sees Asad's approach as basically Geertzian (a characterization to which Asad takes an exception)[55] with special attention to power: "Phrased in a different manner, its ear attuned specifically to the deep, pervading vibrations of power, this [Asad's approach] is basically the dialectic Clifford Geertz began to articulate a quarter-century ago in *Islam Observed*."[56] Here, too, the story is told in terms of objectification and functionalization of Islam—that is, manipulation of a tradition that otherwise, and more authenti-

cally, had been "an unexamined and unexaminable way of life."[57] Interpreting all contemporary transformations of the Islamic tradition as being manipulative has been a common trend among scholars—one that Asad himself rejects (see below). Besides, Starrett leaves out another major conceptual contribution by Asad, which is at least as significant as attention to power—and that is the MacIntyrian deconstruction of the idea of a universal rationality and of tradition as opposed to rationality and, consequently, attention to the relationship of rationality to the discursive tradition that it embodies. This suggestion in fact is at the heart of Asad's idea of a discursive tradition: "It should be the anthropologist's first task to describe and analyze the kinds of reasoning, and the reasons for arguing, that underlie Islamic traditional practices."[58] It is because of their failure to take note of or evaluate the reasoning employed by the subjects that they see all transformations of tradition as incomprehensible except in terms of manipulation. Unfortunately, Hirschkind's insightful discursive analysis with particular attention to various styles of reasoning in different traditions—one that is more in keeping with Asad's own approach—remains an exception rather than a rule among Asad's successors.

The World-Systemic Dimension of the Islamic Tradition

In view of the global versus local Islam dilemma, Asad's approach to Islam as a discursive tradition may be fruitfully complemented by some recent scholars' emphasis on the global dimension of Islam as a world system. In his article "Islam as a Special World-System," John Voll argues that the conventional term *civilization* is vague and unsatisfactory in capturing the diversity of the Islamic world, as compared with Immanuel Wallerstein's concept of a world sys-

54. Eaton, *India's Islamic Traditions*, 24.

55. In a personal communication dated 28 June 2005, Asad explicitly repeats what can be understood plainly from his critique of Geertz: contrary to Starrett's suggestions, Asad considers the Geertzian approach contradictory to his own and rejects the claim that he builds on Geertz's work. Geertz's "general approach through 'symbols,' that includes an essentialist depiction of Islam, is one I reject." In *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, he wrote, "Thus, Geertz has written that 'It is perhaps as true for civilizations

as it is for men that, however much they many later change, the fundamental dimensions of their character, the structure of possibilities within which they will in some sense always move, are set in the plastic period when they were first forming' (*Islam Observed*, p. 11). But the fatality of character that anthropologists like Geertz invoke is the object of a professional writing, not the unconscious of a subject that writes itself as Islam for the Western scholar to read" (Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 9–10).

56. Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft4q2nb3gp.

57. Ibid.

58. Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology*, 16.

tem. Originally conceived to capture the world economic conditions with some core countries at the heart of capitalism and others peripheral, the world-system approach, applied to Islam, captures the translocal dimensions and interactions of the Muslim world—at least since the breakdown of the central caliphate. Features defining Wallerstein's world system, such as boundaries, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence, according to Voll, all apply to the Islamic world. The five pillars of Islam that spawned a worldwide Islamic community spanning cultures and borders, Dar al-Islam, demarcate the members and boundaries; the Sufi *tariqa*s, the scholarly networks, and, most important, one might add to Voll's list, the annual hajj gathering of Muslims from all over the world, serve as vehicles for bringing this unity to fruition in the wake of the political disintegration of the Muslim world.[59] Of course, with modern means of communication and transportation, the worldwide dimension of Islamic discourses has become explosively more prevalent, complex, and significant.[60] Voll further argues, in keeping with Asad's suggestion, that the Islamic world system has been a discourse-based world system of a community of believers.

Of course the cautions and limitations well known to the economic model of the world system apply to the discursive model as well: it tends to bias the analysts toward systemic trends, undermines the unique and nonsystemic events and actors, and has difficulty accounting for peripheral regions within the core and vice versa.

Voll's suggestion nonetheless does an indispensable conceptual service by adding the translocal or global dimension to the anthropologists' localized conceptual toolset. Asad's anthropological concept of local orthodoxy as power, which is not specific to Islam and indeed was developed with close attention to premodern Christianity as a model, says little about the characteristic ways in which Islamic orthodoxy is established and understood worldwide.

This world-system corrective is significant even to the anthropologist's localized world,

because the various local orthodoxies the anthropologist studies are not disconnected and isolated—and change comes more often from outside than from within the local discursive boundaries. Even ordinary believers are aware of the diversity within Islam and contrast their beliefs and practices with other Muslims within and outside their own discursive system, as well as with the Muslims of the past.[61] Hence, the most fascinating questions about any contemporary Muslim society, those of reform, revival, modernity, and tradition, cannot even begin to be addressed unless the mutual interaction of the Muslim world within the framework of a global Islamic discursive tradition is accounted for. And hence the idea of discursive tradition, which by definition is attuned to the idea of teaching and argument through time, becomes capable of transcending local dimensions and encompassing various Islamic spaces. The actual mechanisms and media by which this interaction among various local orthodoxies takes place at any given time, and the power relations that are invariably involved in this enormously complex process, are a fascinating area of research, but they lie beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusion

How can the obvious diversity of lived Islam be organized in terms of an adequate concept? To an anthropologist, or, for that matter, a historian or Islamicist, these questions are best answered, Asad contends, not by (1) asserting a dichotomy of universal Islam gleaned from a study of the texts and assigning as local and un-Islamic all that does not agree with it; (2) comparing various particular Muslim societies and assigning the common element as constant and characteristic of Islam and others as local variables, both of the above approaches having been how Islam's diversity has been accounted for conventionally; or (3) denying the existence of a translocal Islam and acceding to any local belief or understanding as being Islamic, but by studying the discourses that establish or attempt and compete to establish orthodoxy in

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59. John Voll, "Islam as a World-System," *Journal of World History* 5 (1994): 222. Also see William Cummings, "Interdisciplinary Social Science," *Electronic Journal of Sociology* (2000), www.sociology.org/content/vol005.002/cummings.html.

60. For a recent work on the subject, see Cooke and Lawrence, *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*.

61. Launay, *Beyond the Stream*, 7–8.

any given locality, with special attention to the material, political-economic constraints that influence any discursive exercise.

Geertz had pioneered the attempts to find alternatives to the approaches enumerated above, by asserting a universal Islamic religious experience and a diverse Islamic quasi tradition (quasi because his conception of tradition perhaps did not allow for the diversity that results from rational contestation and argument). El-Zein deconstructed the idea of a universal religious experience of Islam, but he ended up negating the possibility of Islam as an object of anthropological study—thus leaving no option for the scholars but to study Muslim societies without any reference to Islam. Asad has made a monumental contribution, one that has the potential to revolutionize the way Muslim societies are studied, by formulating alternative concepts that have since been fruitfully used by scholars in anthropology and other disciplines. He pointed out the historicity and limitedness of Geertz's idea of religion on the one hand and on the other located the Islamic discursive tradition as the real, viable object of study.

But the full potential of Asad's approach has not been exhausted, I have contended in this study, because many have misunderstood aspects of Asad's subtle and multifaceted approach. Scholars' attention to his suggestion that orthodoxy be understood as a power-laden construct should not detract them from seeing his proposal that the Islamic discursive tradition (that seeks to establish orthodoxy) is rational (reasoned) and capable of transformation without losing authenticity. An important consideration in this regard that the present article adduces is that no local transformations of the discursive tradition may remain indifferent to the translocal, global, networked nature of the range of the Islamic Orthodox tradition. Most successors of Asad, with a few exceptions such as Hirschkind, have been too keen to interpret even reasoned change as manipulation. Ismail and Starrett, for instance, both emphasize that

the trends in contemporary Islam are chiefly manipulative and selective.[62] Asad, himself deeply aware of Islam in the contemporary world in a variety of Muslim countries, rejects such reduction of Islamist movements. Compare Starrett's evaluation of contemporary Islamism in Egypt, "The [Islamist] Trend . . . is, in Asad's terms, a new religious tradition," with Asad's own emphatic rejection of such a claim:

> Many writers describe the movements in Iran and Egypt as only partly modern and suggest that it's their mixing of tradition and modernity that accounts for their "pathological" character. This kind of description paints Islamic movements as being somehow inauthentically traditional on the assumption that "real tradition" is unchanging, repetitive, and non-rational. In this way, these movements cannot be understood on their own terms as being at once modern and traditional, both authentic and creative at the same time. The development of politico-religious movements ought to force people to rethink the uniquely Western model of secular modernity. One may want to challenge aspects of these movements, but this ought to be done on specific grounds. It won't do to measure everything by grand conceptions of authentic modernity.[63]

Further elaborating on the power and relevance of the tradition, Asad points out that the Islamists, without obviously applying the classical theological Islamic view in all its specificities to modern circumstances, "as not even the most conservative traditionalist Muslims find it reasonable to do today . . . relate themselves to the classical theological tradition by translating it into their contemporary political predicament."[64]

Asad's contribution, it has been argued here, calls for a balance between the agency of the interpreter as it operates within given material circumstances and the power of the discursive tradition itself.[65] It is here that attention to the scriptures, the classic texts, and the interpretive methods developed early on in Islam, studied meticulously (if at times misleadingly) by the

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62. For example, Starrett's very title *Putting Islam to Work* aptly states his basic thesis, which deals with objectification and functionalization of Islam.

63. Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*, section: "Broken Boundaries and the Politics of Fear"; Talal Asad, "Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions," interview by Saba Mahmood, *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review* 5 (1996), www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5–1/text/asad.html.

64. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 195.

65. Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology*, 17.

conventional Islamicists or orientalists, becomes relevant once again. So, although the methods and conclusions of many of the orientalists are criticized and rejected by Asad, their meticulous attention to texts is still useful in his framework of understanding the full picture of Muslim societies or lived Islam. A useful relationship rather than mutual disregard can therefore be hoped for between the scholars of the scriptural Islam and those of the lived Islam.

The consideration of the power of political-economic and social motivation, in Asad, is tempered with attention to the power of faith, conviction, nostalgia, or superstition, as the case may be. Such an attention makes possible a meeting of the disciplines of Islamology and history on the one hand and anthropology and political economy on the other. ⸽