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THE IDEA OF AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF ISLAM

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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The director of the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies is Professor Michael C. Hudson. Ms. Zeina Azzam Seikaly is the Center’s publications manager. Mr. J. Coleman Kitchen, Jr. edited this paper.
In recent years there has been increasing interest in something called the anthropology of Islam. Publications by Western anthropologists containing the word "Islam" or "Muslim" in the title multiply at a remarkable rate. The political reasons for this great industry are perhaps too evident to deserve much comment. However that may be, here I want to focus on the conceptual basis of this literature. Let us begin with a very general question. What, exactly, is the anthropology of Islam? What is its object of investigation? The answer may seem obvious: what the anthropology of Islam investigates is, surely, Islam. But to conceptualize Islam as the object of an anthropological study is not as simple a matter as some writers would have one suppose.

There appear to be at least three common answers to the question posed above: (1) that in the final analysis there is no such theoretical object as Islam; (2) that Islam is the anthropologist's label for a heterogeneous collection of items, each of which has been designated Islamic by informants; (3) that Islam is a distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life. We will look briefly at the first two answers, and then examine at length the third, which is in principle the most interesting, even though it is not acceptable.

Eight years ago, the anthropologist Abdul Hamid El-Zein struggled with

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Professor Asad presented this paper at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies as the 1984-85 Annual Distinguished Lecture in Arab Studies.
this question in a survey entitled "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The
Search for the Anthropology of Islam." This was a brave effort, but
finally unhelpful. The contention that there are diverse forms of Islam, each
equally real, each worth describing, was linked in a rather puzzling way to
the assertion that they are all ultimately expressions of an underlying uncon-
scious logic. This curious slippage from an anthropological contextualism
into Levi-Straussian universalism led him to the final sentence of his article
"Islam" as an analytical category dissolves as well. In other words, if
Islam is not an analytical category, there cannot, strictly speaking, be such a
thing as an anthropology of Islam.

So much for an answer of the first kind. One adherent of the second point
of view is Michael Gilsenan, who, like El-Zein, emphasizes in his recent
book Recognizing Islam that no form of Islam may be excluded from the
anthropologist's interest on the grounds that it is not Islam. His suggestion
that the different things that Muslims themselves regard as Islamic
should be situated within the life and development of their societies is indeed
a sensible sociological rule, but it does not help identify Islam as an analytical
object of study. The idea he adopts from other anthropologists—that Islam
is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is—will not do, if only because
there are everywhere Muslims who say that what other people take to be
Islam is not really Islam at all. This paradox cannot be resolved simply by
saying that the claim as to what is Islam will be admitted by the anthropologist
only where it applies to the informant's own beliefs and practices, because
it is generally impossible to define beliefs and practices in terms of an isolated
subject. A Muslim's beliefs about the beliefs and practices of others are his
own beliefs. And like all such beliefs, they animate and are sustained by his
social relations with others.

Let us turn then to an answer of the third type. One of the most ambitious
tests to address this question is Ernest Gellner's Muslim Society, in
which an anthropological model is presented of the characteristic ways in
which social structure, religious belief, and political behavior interact with
each other in an Islamic totality. In what follows, I shall deal in some detail
with this text. My purpose, however, is not to assess this particular work,
but to use it to extract theoretical problems that must be examined by anyone
who wishes to write an anthropology of Islam. As it happens, many elements in
the overview and the picture presented by Gellner's other writings—by anthropologists, Orientalists, political scientists, and journal-
ists. In looking at this text one is therefore also looking at more than a unique
account. But the picture it presents is of less interest than the way it has been put together—the assumptions it draws on and the concepts it deploys.

II

There is in fact more than one attempt to conceptualize Islam in Gellner's
text. The first of these involves an explicit comparison between Christianity
and Islam, each broadly conceived as differing historical configurations of
power and belief, one essentially located in Europe, the other in the Middle
East. Such a conceptualization is central to Orientalism, but it is also to be
found implicitly in the writings of many contemporary anthropologists.

One sign of this is the fact that anthropological textbooks on the Middle
East—such as Gullick's or Eickelman's—devote their chapter on "Reli-
gion" entirely to Islam. Although Christianity and Judaism are also indige-
nous to the region, it is only Muslim belief and practice that Western anthrop-
ologists appear to be interested in. In effect, for most Western anthropol-
ogists, Sephardic Judaism and Eastern Christianity are conceptually marginalized and represented as minor branches in the Middle East of a
history that develops elsewhere—in Europe, and at the roots of Western
civilization.

My disquiet about this notion of Europe as the true locus of Christianity and
that of the Middle East as the true locus of Islam does not come simply from
the old objection to religion being represented as the essence of a history and
civilization (an objection which even some Orientalists like Becker advanced
long ago). My concern as an anthropologist is over the way this particular
contrast affects the conceptualization of Islam. Consider, for instance, the
opening paragraphs of Gellner's book. Here the contrast between Islam and
Christianity is drawn in bold, familiar lines:

Islam is the blueprint of a social order. It holds that a set of rules exist, eternal,
divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper
ordering of society.

Judaism and Christianity are also blueprints of a social order, but rather less
so than Islam. Christianity, from its inception, contained an open recommenda-
tion to give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. A faith which begins, and for
some time remains, without political power, cannot but accommodate itself to a
political order to which is not, or is not yet, under its control. ... Christianity,
which initially flourished among the politically disheartened, did not then presume
to be Caesar. A kind of potential for political modesty has stayed with it ever
since those humble beginnings. ... But the initial success of Islam was so rapid
that it had no need to give anything unto Caesar.

If one reads carefully what is being said here, one must be assailed by a
variety of doubts. Consider the long history since Constantine, in which
Christian emperors and kings, lay princes and ecclesiastical administrators,
Church reformers and picture presenters, have all sought by using power
in varying ways to create or maintain the social conditions in which men and
women might live Christian lives—has this entire history nothing to do with
Christianity? As a non-Christian, I would not presume to assert that neither
Liberation Theology nor the Moral Majority belong to the essence of Chris-
tianity. As an anthropologist, however, I find it impossible to accept that
Christian practice and discourse throughout history have been less intimately
concerned with the uses of political power for religious purposes than the
practice and discourse of Muslims.

I want to make it clear that I have nothing in principle against comparisons
between Christian and Muslim histories. Indeed, one of the most valuable
features of the recent book by Fischer on Iran is the inclusion of descriptive material from Jewish and Christian histories in his account of the madrassa system. This is one of the very few anthropological studies of contemporary Islam that employ implicit comparisons with European history, and consequently enrich our understanding.

But one should go beyond drawing parallels, as Fischer does, and attempt a systematic exploration of differences. For this reason, my own research over the past three years has been concerned with detailed comparative analysis of monastic ritual, the sacrament of confession, and the medieval Inquisition in tenth-century Western Europe, which stand in contrast to the very different connections between power and religion in the medieval Middle East. Of particular note is the fact that Christians and Jews have usually formed an integral part of Middle Eastern society in a way that is not true of non-Christian populations in Europe. My claim has been that two important and valid one that Muslims rulers have in general been more tolerant of non-Muslim subjects than Christian rulers have of non-Christian subjects, but simply that medieval Christian and Muslim authorities ("religious" and "political") must have had to devise very different strategies for developing moral subjects and regulating subject populations. This is too large a subject to be expounded here, even in outline, but it is worth touching on by way of illustration.

Modern historians have often observed that Muslim scholars in the classical and post-classical periods displayed no curiosity about Christianity, and that in that their attitude was strikingly different from the lively interest shown by their Christian contemporaries in the beliefs and practices not only of Islam but of other cultures too. What is the reason for this intellectual indifference toward Others? The explanation given by Orientalists such as Bernard Lewis is that the early military successes of Islam bred an attitude of contempt and complacency toward Christian Europe. "Masked by the imposing military might of the Ottoman Empire, the peoples of Islam continued until the dawn of the modern age to cherish—as many in East and West still do today—the conviction of the immeasurable and immutable superiority of their civilization to all others. For the medieval Muslim from Andalusia to Persia, Christian Europe was still an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief, from which the sunlit world of Islam had little to fear and less to learn." Perhaps this was so, but our question is whether it makes the difference in the detailed workings of disciplinary power in Christian history and because it is theoretically most inaccurate. The argument here is not against the attempt to generalize about Islam, but against the manner in which that generalization is undertaken. Anyone working on the anthropology of Islam will be aware that there is considerable diversity in the beliefs and practices of Muslims. The first problem is therefore one of organizing this diversity in terms of an adequate concept. The familiar representation of essential Islam as the fusion of religion with power is not one of these. But neither is the nominalist view that different instances of what are called Islam are essentially unique and sui generis.

III

So far we have looked very briefly at one aspect of the attempt to produce an anthropology of Islam: the virtual equation of Islam with the Middle East, and the definition of Muslim history as the "mirror image" (Gellner) of Christian history, in which the connection between religion and power is simply reduced to power. This view is open to criticism both because it draws distinctions that are not there and because it is theoretically most inaccurate. The argument here is not against the attempt to generalize about Islam, but against the manner in which that generalization is undertaken. Anyone working on the anthropology of Islam will be aware that there is considerable diversity in the beliefs and practices of Muslims. The first problem is therefore one of organizing this diversity in terms of an adequate concept. The familiar representation of essential Islam as the fusion of religion with power is not one of these. But neither is the nominalist view that different instances of what are called Islam are essentially unique and sui generis.
One way in which anthropologists have attempted to resolve the problem of diversity is to adapt the Orientalist distinction between orthodox and nonorthodox Islam to the categories of Great and Little Traditions, and thus to set up the seemingly more acceptable distinction between the scripturalist, puritanical faith of the towns, and the saint-worshipping, ritualistic religion of the countryside. For anthropologists, neither form of Islam has a claim to being regarded as "more real" than the other. They are variants in different ways in different conditions. In fact, the religion of the country-side is taken as a single form only in an abstract, contrastive sense. Precisely because it is by definition particularistic, rooted in variable local conditions and personalities, and authorized by the uncheckable memories of oral cultures, the Islam of the unlettered countryside is highly variable. "Orthodoxy" is therefore, for such anthropologists, merely one (albeit invariable) form of Islam among many, distinguished by its preoccupation with the necessities of doctrine and law, claiming its authority from sacred texts rather than sacred persons.

This dichotomy has been popularized by two well-known Western anthropologists of Moroccan Islam, Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner, and by some of their pupils. But what made it interesting was the further argument that there was an apparent correlation of this dual Islam with two types of distinctive social structure, something first proposed by French colonial scholarship on the Maghrib. Classical Maghribi society, it was claimed, consisted on the one hand of the centralized, hierarchical organization of the cities, and on the other of the egalitarian, segmental organization of the surrounding tribes. The cities were governed by rulers who continually attempted to subdue the disident, self-governing tribes; the tribesmen in turn resisted with varying degrees of success, and sometimes, when united by an outstanding religious leader, even managed to strike a blow at the ruler. The two categories of Islam fit nicely into the two kinds of social and political structure: "sharia" law in the cities, variable custom among the tribes; "ulama" in the former, saints among the latter. Both structures are seen as parts of a single system because they define the opponents between whom an unceasing struggle for political dominance takes place. More precisely, because both urban and tribal populations are Muslim, all owing at the very least a nominal allegiance to the revered texts and (and perhaps also implicitly to their literate guardians), a particular style of political struggle emerges. It is possible for urban rulers to claim authority over the tribes, and for tribes to support a country-based leader who aims to supplant the ruler in the name of Islam.

To this broad schema, which was initially the product of a French "sociology of Islam," Gellner has added, in successive publications, a number of details drawn from a reading of (1) the classical sociologies of religion, (2) Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah, and (3) British anthropological writings on segmentary lineage theory. And he has extended it to cover virtually the whole of North Africa and the Middle East, and almost the entire span of Muslim history. The resulting picture has been used by him, and drawn on by others, to elaborate the old contrast between Islam and Christianity in a series of inversions—as in the following crisp account by Bryan Turner:

"There is a sense in which we can say that in religion 'the southern, Muslim shore of the Mediterranean is a kind of mirror-image of the northern shore, of Europe.' On the northern shore, the central religious tradition is hierarchical, ritualistic, with a strong rural appeal. One corner-stone of the official religion is saintship. The devout reformist tradition is egalitarian, puritan, urban and excludes priestly mediation. On the southern shore, Islam reverses this pattern: it is the tribal, rural tradition which is deviant, hierarchical and ritualistic. Similarly, saint and shaikh are mirror-image roles. Whereas in Christianity the saints are orthodox, individualistic, dead, canonized by central authorities, in Islam the shaikhs are heterodox, tribal or associational, living and recognized by local consent."

Even as it applies to the Maghrib, this picture has been subjected to damaging criticism by scholars with access to indigenous historical sources in Arabic (e.g., Hamoudou, Cornell). This kind of criticism is important, but will not be pursued here. While it is worth asking whether this anthropological account of Islam is valid for the entire Muslim world (or even for the Maghrib) given the historical information available, let us instead focus on a different issue: What are the discursive styles employed here to represent (a) the historical variations in Islamic political structure, and (b) the different forms of Islamic religion linked to the latter? What kinds of questions do these styles deflect us from considering? What concepts do we need to develop as anthropologists in order to pursue those very different kinds of questions in a viable manner?

In approaching this issue, let us consider the following interconnected points: (1) Narratives about culturally distinctive actors must try to translate and represent the historically-situated discourses of such actors as responses to the discourse of others, instead of schematizing and de-historicizing their actions. (2) Anthropological analyses of social structure should not focus on typical actors but on the changing patterns of institutional relationships and conditions (especially those we call political economies). (3) The analysis of Middle Eastern political economies and the representation of Islamic "dramas" are essentially different kinds of discursive exercise which cannot be substituted for each other, although they can be significantly embedded in the same narrative, precisely because they are discourses. (4) It is wrong to represent types of Islam as being correlated with types of social structure, on the implicit analogy with (ideological) superstructure and (social) base. (5) Islam as the object of anthropological understanding should be approached as a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges.

IV

If one reads an anthropological text such as Gellner's carefully, one may notice that the social and political structures of classical Muslim society are
represented in a very distinctive way. What one finds in effect are protagon-
nists engaged in a dramatic struggle. Segmentary tribes confront centralized
states. Armed nomads "just after the city," and unarmed merchants fear the
nomads. Saints mediate between conflicting tribal groups, but also between
the illiterate nomad and a remote, capricious God. Literate clerics serve their
powerful ruler and try to maintain the sacred law. The puritanical bourgeoisie
employs religion to legitimize its privileged status. The city's poor seek a
religion of excitement. Religious reformers unite pastoral warriors against a
decaying dynasty. Demonized rulers are destroyed by the disenchantment of
their urban subjects converging with the religious and military power of
their tribal enemies.

A representation of social structure that is cast entirely in terms of dramatic
roles tends to exclude other conceptions, to which we shall turn in a moment.
But even a narrative about typical actors requires an account of the
structure that orient their behavior and in which that behavior can be represented (or
misrepresented) by actors to each other. In a dramatic play in the strict sense,
these discourses are contained in the very lines the actors speak. An account
of indigenous discourses is, however, totally missing in Gellner's narrative.
Gellner's Islamic actors do not speak, they do not think, they behave. And
yet without adequate evidence, motives for "normal" and "revolutionary"
behavior are continually being attributed to the actions of the major protag-
onists in classical Muslim society. There are, to be sure, references in the
text to "partners who speak the same moral language," but it is clear that
such expressions are merely dead metaphors, because Gellner's conception
of language here is that of an emollient that can be isolated from the power
process. In the context of his description of the circulation of elites "within-
am-immobile-structure," for example, he writes that "Islam provided a com-
mon language and thus a certain kind of smoothness in a system which was
a more mute and brutalistic form, had been taking place anyway." In other
words, if one removes the common language of Islam, nothing of any signif-
icance changes. The language is no more than a facilitating instrument of
a domination that is already in place.

This purely instrumental view of language is very inadequate—inadequate
precisely for the kind of narrative that tries to describe Muslim society in
terms of what generates culturally recognizable actors. It is only when the
anthropologist takes historically defined discourses seriously, and especially
the way they constitute events, that questions can be asked about the con-
ditions in which Muslim rulers and subjects might have responded variously
to authority, to physical force, to persuasion, or simply to habit.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that Geertz, who is usually regarded
as having a primary interest in cultural meanings as against Gellner's preoc-
cupation with social causation, presents a narrative of Islam in his Islam
Observed that is not, in this respect, very different. For Geertz's Islam is
also a dramaturgical one. Indeed, being more conscious of his own highly-
wrought literary style, he has made explicit use of metaphors of political
theater. The politics of Islam in "classical" Morocco and in "classical"
Indonesia are very differently portrayed, but each, in its own way, is por-
trayed as essentially theatrical. Yet for Geertz, as for Gellner, the schema-
tization of Islam as a drama of religiosity expressing power is obtained by
omitting indigenous discourses, and by turning all Islamic behavior into
readable gesture.

Devising narratives about the expressions and the expressive intentions of
dramatic players is not the only option available to anthropologists. Social
life can also be written or talked about by using analytic concepts. Not using
such concepts simply means failing to ask particular questions, and misconstruc-
ting historical structures.

For example, consider the notion of tribe. This idea is central to the kind
of anthropology of Islam of which Gellner's text is such a prominent example.
It is often used by many writers on the Middle East to refer to social entities
with very different structures and modes of livelihood. Ordinarily, where
theoretical issues are not involved, this does not matter very much. But
where one is concerned, as at present, with conceptual problems, it is impor-
tant to consider the implications for analysis of an indiscriminate usage of
the term "tribe."

It is the case not only that so-called "tribes" vary enormously in their
formal constitution, but more particularly that pastoral nomads do not have
an ideal-typical economy. Their variable socioeconomic arrangements have
very different implications for their possible involvement in politics, trade,
and war. Several Marxists, such as Perry Anderson, have argued for the
concept of a "pastoral mode of production," and following him Bryan Turner
has suggested that this concept should form part of a theoretically informed
account of Muslim social structures because and to the extent that Middle
Eastern countries have pastoral nomads living in them.13

The assumption that pastoral nomads in the Muslim Middle East have a
similar political and economic structure is misleading. The reasons for this
are too involved and tangential to consider here, but a brief look at the issue
will remind us of concepts of social structure different from those still being
deployed by many anthropologists and historians of Islam.

Any study of the military capabilities of pastoral nomads in relation to
townsmen must begin not from the simple fact that they are pastoral nomads,
but from a variety of political-economic conditions, some systematic, some
contingent. Types of animals reared, patterns of seasonal migration, forms
of herd management, rules of access to pastures and watering points,
distribution of animal wealth, degree of dependence on returns through sales,
on direct subsistence cultivation, on gifts and tribute from political superiors
or inferiors—these and other considerations are relevant for an understanding
of even the basic question of how many spare men can be mustered for war,
how readily, and for how long. Among the pastoral nomadic population I
studied in the deserts of northern Sudan many years ago, for example, the

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possibilities for mobilizing large numbers of fighting men had altered drastically from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth primarily because of a large increase in small livestock, a shift to more intensive and complex herding arrangements, greater involvement in animal sales, and a different pattern of property rights. The point is not that this tribal grouping is somewhat typical of the Middle East. Indeed, there are no typical tribes. My argument is simply that what nomads are able or inclined to do in relation to settled populations is the product of various historical conditions that define their political economy, and not the expression of some essential motive that belongs to tribal protagonists in a classic Islamic drama. In other words, "tribes" are no more to be regarded as agents than "discursive structures" or "societies" are. They are historical structures in terms of which the limits and possibilities of people's lives are realized. This does not mean that "tribes" are less real than the individuals who comprise them, but the vocabulary of motives, behavior, and utterances does not belong, strictly speaking, in analytic accounts whose principal object is "tribe," although such accounts can be embedded in narratives about agency. It is precisely because "tribes" are differently structured in time and place that the motives, the forms of behavior, and the import of utterances will differ too.

Representations of Muslim society that are constructed along the lines of an action play have, not surprisingly, no place for peasants. Peasants, like women, are not depicted as doing anything. In accounts like Gellner's they have no dramatic role and no distinctive religious expression—in contrast, that is, to nomadic tribes and city-dwellers. But of course as soon as one turns to the concepts of productive groups, one can change the subject of the different story. Cultivators, male and female, produce crops (just as pastoralists of both sexes raise animals) which they sell or yield up in rent and taxes. Peasants, even in the historical Middle East, do do something that is crucial in relation to the social formations of that region, but that doing has to be conceptualized in political-economic and not in dramatic terms. The medieval agricultural sector underwent important changes that had far-reaching consequences for the development of urban populations, of a money economy, of regional and transcontinental trade. This is true also for the later pre-modern period, even though economic histories talk of the changes in terms of decline rather than growth. One does not have to be an economic determinist to acknowledge that such changes have profound implications for questions of domination and autonomy.

This approach to writing about Middle Eastern society, which pays special attention to the long-term working of impersonal constraints, will be sensitive to the indissoluble but varying connections between the social, economic, and political power. It will also continually remind us that historical Middle Eastern societies were never self-contained, never isolated from external relations, and so never entirely unchanging, even before their incorporation into the modern world system. Unlike those narrators who present us with a fixed cast of Islamic dramatis personae, enacting a predetermined story, we can look for connections, changes, and differences, beyond the fixed stage of an Islamic theater. We shall then write not about an essential Islamic social structure, but about historical formations in the Middle East whose elements are never fully integrated, and never bounded by the geographical limits of "the Middle East." It is too often forgotten that "the world of Islam" is a concept for organizing historical narratives, not the name for a self-contained collective agent. This is not to say that historical narratives have no social effect—on the contrary. But the integrity of the world of Islam is essentially ideological, a discursive representation. Thus, Geertz has written that "It is perhaps as true for civilizations as it is for men that, however much they may 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." 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.

VI

The anthropology of Islam being criticized here depicts a classic social structure consisting essentially of tribesmen and city-dwellers, the natural carriers of two major forms of religion—the normal tribal religion centered on saints and shrines, and the dominant urban religion based on the "Holy Book." My argument is that if the anthropologist seeks to understand religion by placing it conceptually in its social context, then the way in which that social context is described must affect the understanding of religion. If we reject the schema of an unchanging dualistic structure of Islam promoted by some anthropologists, if one decides to write about the social structures of Muslim societies in terms of overlapping spaces and times, so that the Middle East becomes a focus of convergences (and therefore of many possible histories), then the dual typology of Islam will surely seem less plausible. It is true that in addition to the two major types of religion proposed by the kind of anthropology of Islam we are talking about, minor forms are sometimes specified. This is so in Gellner's account, and in many others. Thus there is the "revolutionary" as opposed to the "normal" Islam of the tribes, which periodically merges with and revivifies the puritan ideology of the cities. And there is the ecstatic, mystical religion of the urban poor which, as "the opium of the masses," excludes them from effective political action—until, that is, the impact of modernity when it is the religion of the urban masses which becomes "revolutionary." In a curious way, these two minor forms of Islam serve, in Gellner's text, as markers, one positive, one negative, of the two great epochs of Islam—the classical rotation-within-an-immobile structure, and the turbulent developments and mass movements of the contemporary world. So this apparent concession to the idea that there may be more than two types of Islam is at the same time a literary device to define the notions of "traditional" and "modern" Muslim society.
Now, the anthropologist's presentation of Islam will depend not only on the way in which social structures are conceptualized, but on the way in which religion itself is defined. Anyone familiar with what is called the sociology of religion will know of the difficulties involved in producing a conception of religion that is adequate for cross-cultural purposes. This is an important point because one's conception of religion determines the kinds of questions one thinks are worth asking. But far too few would-be anthropologists of Islam pay this matter serious attention. Instead, they often draw indiscriminately on ideas from the writings of the great sociologists (e.g., Marx, Weber, Durkheim) in order to describe forms of Islam, and the result is not always consistent.

Gellner's text is illustrative in this regard. The types of Islam that are presented as being characteristic of "traditional Muslim society" in Gellner's picture are constructed according to three very different concepts of religion. Thus, the "normal tribal religion," "that of the dervish or marabout," is explicitly Durkheimian. "It is . . . concerned," we are told, "with the social punctuation of time and space, with season-making and group-boundary-marking festivals. The sacred makes these joyful, visible, conspicuous and authoritative" (p. 52). So the concept of religion here involves a reference to collective rituals to be read as an enactment of the sacred, which is also, for Durkheim, the symbolic representation of social and cosmological structures.

The concept that is deployed in the description of the religion of the urban poor is quite different, and it is obviously derived from the early writings of Marx on religion as false consciousness. "The city has its poor," Gellner writes, "they are uprooted, insecure, alienated. . . . What they require from religion is consolation or escape; their taste is for ecstasy, excitement, an absorption in which religious conditions is also in religious ritual. If one looks at this kind of construction carefully, one finds that what is called religion here is the psychological response to an emotional experience. What was indicated in the account of tribal Islam was an emotional effect, but here it is an emotional cause. In the one case the reader was told about collective rituals and their meaning, about ritual specialists and their roles; in the other attention is directed instead to private distress and unfulfilled desire.

When one turns to the religion of the bourgeoisie, one is confronted by yet other organizing ideas. "The well-heeled urban bourgeoisie," remarks Gellner, "far from having a taste for public festivals, prefers the sober satisfactions of learned piety, a taste more consonant with its dignity and commercial calling. Its fastidiousness underscores its standing, distinguishing it both from rustics and the urban plebs. In brief, urban life provides a sound base for scripturalist Unitarian puritanism. Islam expresses such a state of mind better perhaps than other religions" (p. 42). The echoes from Weber's Protestant Ethic in this passage are not accidental, for its authority is invoked more than once. In this account, the "bourgeois Muslim" is accorded a moral—or, better, an aesthetic—style. His distinguishing feature is the literacy that gives him direct access to the founding scriptures and the Law. In this latter respect one is urged to see him as immersed in a moralistic, literate enterprise. Neither collective rituals nor unquenched desire, neither social solidarity nor alienation, religion is here the solemn maintenance of public authority which is rational partly because it is in writing, and partly because it is linked to socially useful activities: service to the state, and commitment to commerce.

These different ways of talking about religion—the tribal and the urban—are not merely different aspects of the same thing. They are different textual constructions which seek to represent different things, and which make different assumptions about the nature of social reality, about the origins of needs, and about the rationale of cultural meanings. For this reason, they are not merely different representations, they are incompatible constructions.

In referring to them one is not comparing like with like.

But the main difficulty with such constructions is not that they are inconsistent. It is that this kind of anthropiology of Islam (and I want to stress here that Gellner's eclecticism is typical of very many sociological writers on Islam) rests on false conceptual oppositions and equivalences, which often lead writers into making ill-founded assertions about motives, meanings, and effects relating to "religion." More important, it makes difficult the formulation of questions that are at once less tendentious and more interesting than those which many observers of contemporary Islam (both "conservative" and "radical" Islam) seek to answer.

An instructive example is the hoary old argument about the totalitarian character of orthodox Islam. Like Bernard Lewis and many others, Gellner proposes that scriptural Islam has an elective affinity for Marxism, partly because of "the inbuilt vocation towards the implementation of a sharply defined divine order on earth" (p. 47), and partly because of "The totalism of its rites" (ibid.).

Quite apart from the empirical question of how widespread Marxist movements have been among twentieth-century Muslim populations, it must be said that the notion of a totalitarian Islam rests on a mistaken view of the social effectivity of ideologies. A moment's reflection will show that it is not the literal scope of the sharī'īa which matters here but the degree to which it informs and regulates social practices, and it is clear that there has never been any Muslim society in which the religious law of Islam has governed more than a fragment of social life. If one contrasts this fact with the highly regulated character of social life in modern states, one may immediately see the reason why. The administrative and legal regulations of such secular states are far more pervasive and effective in controlling the details of people's lives than anything to be found in Islamic history. The difference, of course, lies not in the textual specifications of what is vaguely called a social blueprint, but in the reach of institutional powers that constitute, divide up, and govern large stretches of social life according to systematic rules in modern industrial societies, whether capitalist or communist.

In 1972, Nikki Keddie wrote: "Fortunately, Western scholarship seems to have emerged from the period when many were writing . . . that Islam and Marxism were so similar in many ways that one might lead to the other."
Perhaps that period of Western scholarly innocence is not entirely behind us. But the point of this example will be lost if it is seen as merely another attempt to defend Islam against the claim that it has affinities with a totalitarian system. Such a claim has been challenged in the past, and even if rational criticism cannot prevent the claim from being reproduced, the matter is in itself of little theoretical interest. Instead, it is important to emphasize that one must carefully examine established social practices, "religious" as well as "nonreligious," in order to understand the conditions that define "conservative" or "radical" political activity in the contemporary Islamic world. And it is to this idea that we will now turn.

VII

My general argument so far has been that no coherent anthropology of Islam can be founded on the notion of a determinate social blueprint, or on the idea of an integrated social totality in which social structure and religious ideology interact. This does not mean that no coherent object for an anthropology of Islam is possible, or that it is adequate to say that anything Muslims believe or do can be regarded by the anthropologist as part of Islam. Many anthropologies of Islam have defined their scope too widely, both those appealing to an essentialist principle and those employing a nominalist one. 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. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition. In a useful article, "The Study of Islam in Local Contexts," Eickelman has recently suggested that there is a major theoretical need for taking up the "middle ground" between the study of village or tribe as an essentially universal Islam. This may well be so, but 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" is just such a concept.

What is a tradition? A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, in the past, has been transmitted and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourses that address itself to conceptions of the Islamic practice with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. Clearly, not everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition. Nor is an Islamic tradition in this sense necessarily imitative of what was done in the past. For even where traditional practices appear to the anthropologist to be imitative of what has gone before, it will be the practitioners' conceptions of what is apt performance, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form.

Yet another point, as some Western anthropologists and Westernized Muslim intellectuals have argued, that "tradition" is today often a fiction of the present, a reaction to the forces of modernity—that in contemporary conditions of crisis, tradition in the Muslim world is a weapon, a ruse, a defense, designed to confront a threatening world, 27 that it is an old cloak for new aspirations and borrowed styles of behavior. The claim that contemporary ideas and social arrangements are really ancient when they are not in itself no more significant than the pretense that new ones have been introduced when actually they have not. Lying to oneself, as well as to others, about the relationship of the present to the past is as banal in modern societies as it is in societies that anthropologists typically study. The important point is simply that all instituted practices are oriented to a conception of the past.

For the anthropologist of Islam, the proper theoretical beginning is therefore an instituted practice (set in a particular context, and having a particular history) into which Muslims are inducted as Muslims. For analytical purposes there is no essential difference on this point between "classical" and "modern" Islam. The discourses in which the teaching is done, in which the correct performance of the practice is defined and learned, are intrinsic to all Islamic practices. It is therefore somewhat misleading to suggest, as some sociologists have done, 27 that it is orthopraxy and not orthodoxy, ritual and not doctrine, that matters in Islam. It is misleading because such a contention ignores the centrality of the notion of "the correct model" to which an instituted practice—such as ritual—ought to conform, a model conveyed in authoritative formulas in Islamic traditions as in others. And I refer here primarily not to the programmatic discourses of "modernist" and "fundamentalist" Islamic movements, but to the established practices of unlettered Muslims. A practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims whether by an 'adim, a khatib, a Sa'di shaykh, or an uneducated parent. (It may be worth recalling here that etymologically "doctrine" means teaching, and that orthodox doctrine therefore denotes the correct process of teaching, as well as the correct statement of what is to be learned.)

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 Geisser, 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.

In their representation of "Islamic tradition," Orientalists and anthropologists have often marginalized the place of argument and reasoning surrounding traditional practices. Argument is generally represented as a symptom of "the tradition in crisis," on the assumption that "normal" tradition (what Abdullah Larouz calls "tradition as structure" and distinguishes from "tradition as ideology"36) excludes reasoning just as it requires unthinking conformity. But these contrasts and equations are themselves the work of a historical motivation, manifest in Edmund Burke's ideological opposition between "tradition" and "reason."63 an opposition which was elaborated by the conservative theorists who followed him, and introduced into sociology by Weber.

Reason and argument are necessarily involved in traditional practice whenever people have to be taught about the point and proper performance of that practice, and whenever the teaching meets with doubt, indifference, or lack of understanding. It is largely because we think of argument in terms of formal debate, confrontation, and polemic that we assume it has no place in traditional practice.4 Yet the process of trying to win someone over for the willing performance of a traditional practice, as distinct from trying to demolish an opponent's intellectual position, is a necessary part of Islamic discursive traditions as of others. If reasons and arguments are intrinsic to traditional practice, and not merely to "a tradition in crisis," 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. It is here that the analyst may discover a central modality of power, and of the resistances it encounters—for the process of arguing, of using the force of reason, at once presupposes and responds to the fact of resistance. Power, and resistance, are thus intrinsic to the development and exercise of any traditional practice.

A theoretical consequence of this is that traditions should not be regarded as essentially homogeneous, that heterogeneity in traditional practices is not necessarily an indication of the absence of an Islamic tradition. The variety of traditional Islamic practices in different times, places, and populations, indicates the different Islamic reasonings that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain. The idea that traditions are essentially homogeneous has a powerful intellectual appeal, but it is mistaken. Indeed, widespread homogeneity is a function not of tradition, but of the development and control of communication techniques that are part of modern industrial societies.65

Although Islamic traditions are not homogeneous, they aspire to coherence, in the way that all discursive traditions do. That they do not always attain it is due as much to the constraints of political and economic conditions in which the traditions are placed as to their inherent limitations. Thus, in our own time the attempt by Islamic traditions to organize memory and desire in a coherent manner is increasingly remade by the social forces of industrial capitalism, which create conditions favorable to very different patterns of desire and forgetfulness.67 An anthropology of Islam will therefore seek to understand the historical conditions that enable the production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions, or their transformation—and the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence.68

VIII

I have been arguing that anthropologists interested in Islam need to rethink their object of study, and that the concept of tradition will help in this task. I now want to conclude with a final brief point. To write about a 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. In other words, there clearly is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a universally acceptable account of a living tradition. Any representation of tradition is contestable. What shape that contestation takes, if it occurs, will be determined not only by the powers and knowledges each side deploys, but by the collective life they aspire to—or to whose survival they are quite indifferent. Moral neutrality, here as always, is no guarantee of political innocence.


16. The changing networks of intercontinental trade which linked Dar ul-Islam to Europe, Africa, and Asia differentially affected and were affected by patterns of production and consumption within it (see M. Lombard, *L'Islam dans sa première grandeur: VIIIe-XIe siècle* [Paris: Flammarion, 1971]). Even the spread of contagious disease with its drastic social and economic consequences connected Middle Eastern political units with other parts of the world (see M. W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977], especially pp. 36-37). It would not be necessary to refer so baldly to well-known historical evidence if it were not still common for eminent scholars to write of "Islam" as a mechanically balanced social structure, reflecting its own dynamic of cause and effect, and having its own isolated destiny.


18. Gellner’s resort to the Durkheimian viewpoint on religion is not quite as consistent as it ought to be. Thus, in one place we read that "the faith of the tribesman needs to be mediated by special and distinct holy personnel, rather than to be egalitarian; it needs to be joyous and festival-worthy, not puritanical and scholarly; it requires hierarchy and incarnation in persons, not in scripts" (p. 41, emphasis added). But a dozen pages later, when Gellner wants to introduce the idea of “revolutionary” tribal religion, these needs have to be made to disappear: "It is a curious but crucial fact about the social psychology of Muslim tribesmen," he writes, "that their normal religion is for them at one level a mere pis aller, and is tinged with irony, and with an ambivalent recognition that the real norms lie elsewhere" (p. 52, emphasis in original).

19. Such phrases might be more plausible (but not therefore entirely valid—see, e.g., J. Abu-Lughod, "Varieties of Urban Experience," *Middle Eastern Cities*, ed. I. Lapidos [Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1969]) if applied to the condition of poor rural migrants in a modern metropolis. To describe the lower strata of medieval Muslim cities, with their organization into quarters, guilds, Sufi brotherhoods, etc., as being “uprooted, insecure, alienated” is surely a little fanciful, unless, of course, one takes the mere occurrence of bread riots in periods of economic hardship as a sign.

NOTES


of mental disturbance among the poor. Yet, oddly enough, when Gellner
does refer to the urban masses in twentieth-century cities, a totally new
motivation is imputed to the uprooted migrants: "The tribal style of religion
loses then much of its function, whilst the urban one gains in authority and
prestige from the eagerness of migrant-rustics to acquire respectability" (p.
58, emphasis added). Now the religion of the urban poor is attributed no
longer to a desire for forgetting, but to a desire for respectability.
20. Most of those Muslims for most of their history, as Gellner himself acknowledge
ments, cannot be described as scripturalist puritans, yet 'Islam,' he claims, expresses a scripturalist state of mind better than other religions. There is
surely some fuzziness here. It is clear that Gellner is identifying the essential
tendency of Islam with what he regards as the life-style of the "well-heeled
urban bourgeois." This equation may be appealing to some Muslims, but the
attentive reader will wish to ask in what sense this social group is naturally "puritan," and in what sense they are "better" than seventeenth-century Puritans in England and America. A natural "distaste for public festivals"? Anyone who has lived in a Muslim community, or read
relevant historical accounts (e.g., Edward Lane's Manners and Customs of the
Modern Egyptians [London: Dent (Everyman edition), 1908], or Snouck
Huurgronje's Meerka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century [Leiden: Brill,
1931]), will know the rites of passage are more elaborate among the "well-
heeled urban bourgeoisie" than among the lower urban social strata. "Scriptu-
ralism" based on literacy? But the literacy of merchants is a very different
thing from the literacy of professional "men of religion" (see B. V. Street's
excellent book, Literacy in Theory and Practice [Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1984]). Besides, the traditions of Qur'anic exegesis develop-
ed by Muslim "men of religion" are far richer and more diverse than the
blanket term "scripturalist" suggests.
21. In researching the view that there is an "elective affinity" between
Islam and Marxism, Gellner appears to have missed the fact that Ibn Khaldun,
the only classical Muslim theorist who deals in detail with connections between
political power and the economy, warns explicitly against the government's
trying to control trade or production—see The Muqaddimah, abridged edition
government control of the economy has never been part of classical Muslim
theory, but is central to classical Marxism, there is here a crucial opposition
between the two.
22. Apart from the important communist parties in Iraq and Sudan (neither of
which commanded a massive following), Marxism has had no real roots among
contemporary Muslim populations. States like the People's Demo-
cratic Republic of Yemen are exceptions that prove the rule. (See also A. A.
Bennigsen and S. E. Wimbush, Muslim National Communism in the Soviet
Union [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979] for an account of protracted
resistance against Russian imperial power.) Marxist ideology has been associ-
ated with some Westernized intellectuals and some authoritarian states, but
never with the 'ulama or the well-heeled urban bourgeois, who are

supposed by Gellner to be the historical carriers of scripturalist, unitarian,
puritan Islam. It is his mistaken attempt to connect this latter kind of Islam
with "Marxism," "socialism," or "social radicalism" (terms used indiscrimi-
ately) that leads him to make the implausible argument that "scripturalist
rigorism or fundamentalism" is admirably suited to bringing about modern-
ization in the Muslim world.
23. As a succinct evocation of the powers of a modern state, the following
maxim in a passage from Robert Musil's great novel has scarcely been bet-
tered: "The fact is, living permanently in a well-ordered State has an out-
and-out spectral aspect: one cannot step into the street or drink a glass of
water or get into a tram without touching the perfectly balanced levers of a
gigantic apparatus of laws and relations, setting them in motion or letting
them maintain one in the peace and quiet of one's existence. One hardly
knows how many of these levers, which extend deep into the inner workings and
on the other side are lost in a network the entire constitution of which has
never been disentangled by any living being. Hence one denies their exist-
ence, just as the common man denies the existence of the air, insisting that
24. N. Keddie, Scholars, Saints, and Sufis (Berkeley and Los Angeles:
26. In outlining the concept of tradition, I am indebted to the insightful
writings of Alisdair MacIntyre, in particular his brilliant book After Virtue
27. Thus Gilsen: "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 unstable 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." (Recognizing Islam, p. 15.)
28. Or as Abdallah Laroui puts it in The Crisis of The Arab Intellectual
(Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1976), p. 35: "one
might say that tradition exists only when innovation is accepted under the
cloak of fidelity to the past."
29. For example, see Eickelman, The Middle East, Chapter 9. In a short
that orthodoxy is always the product of a network of power.
30. Incidentally, it is time that anthropologists of Islam realized that there
is more to Ibn Khaldun than his "political sociology," that his deployment of
the Aristotelian concept of virtue (in the form of the Arabic malakat) is
especially relevant to an understanding of what I have called Islamic tradi-


32. Larou, op. cit., p. 33.


35. Thus, in an essay entitled "Late Antiquity and Islam: Parallels and Contrasts" (in B. D. Metcalf, op. cit.), the eminent historian Peter Brown quotes with approval from Henri Marrou: "For in the last resort classical humanism was based on tradition, something imparted by one's teachers and handed on unquestioningly ... it meant that all the minds of one generation, and indeed of a whole historical period, had a fundamental homogeneity which made communication and genuine communion easier" (p. 24). It is precisely this familiar concept, which Brown employs to discuss "the Islamic tradition," that anthropologists should abandon in favor of another.

36. For an introductory discussion of some problems relating to the control and effects of a typically modern form of communication, see R. Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form (London: Fontana, 1974).

37. The result among Muslim intellectuals has been described by Jacques Berque thus: "Dans le monde actuel et parmi trop d'intellectuels actuels et de militants, on se partage entre adeptes d'une authenticité sans avenir et adeptes d'une modernité sans racines. Le françois traduit mal, en l'espece, ce qui en arabe vient beaucoup mieux: ancres al-macr bila acil wa ancak al-a bila macir." (L'Islam: la philosophie et les sciences [Paris: Les Presses de l'U-nesco, 1981], p. 68.)

38. It should be stressed that the problem indicated here is not the same as the one treated in the many monographs that purport to describe the recent "erosion of the old unity of values" based on Divine Revelation which has accompanied the disruption of the "stable, indeed static, social world" of traditional Muslim society (cf. M. Gilsenan, Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973], pp. 196, 192). A recent example that addresses some of the questions I have in mind is S. Zubaida's "The ideological conditions for Khomeini's doctrine of government," Economy & Society, XI (1982), which attempts to show that Khomeini's novel doctrine of wilayat-i-faqih, although based on traditional Shari'a premises and modes of reasoning, presupposes the modern concepts of "nation" and "nation-state." Zubaida's argument does not require the assumption of traditional stability or homogeneity.

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