ONE

How to think about religions – Islam, for example

One day while driving home from work, I turned on National Public Radio, as I often do, and landed right in the middle of a story on women in Saudi Arabia. A Muslim woman was speaking about the well-known prohibition of women driving in that country; she argued that this and other constraints on women's freedom were "part of Saudi culture, not Islam." The NPR narrator began her summary with, "In this traditional Islamic culture . . . "

It is tempting to ascribe features of social life in certain societies to their "Islamic culture," to a way of life that follows from their religious beliefs. Older ways of thinking in Islamic studies (Lewis 1988) were built around this kind of reasoning. Sometimes we do the opposite, as the Muslim woman interviewed did, when she contrasted Islam to the regrettable facts of "Saudi culture." Neither way of speaking admits to reciprocal linkages between religion and particular cultural frameworks. For the one, Islam is only a matter of culture; for the other, it is only a matter of religion.

Unfortunately, these two ways of speaking tend to dominate public discourse about Islam in North America and Europe. I recall a recent series of gatherings at a Unitarian church in St. Louis with several representatives of the largest local mosque, an outreach group that had found its work multiplying after 9/11. I attended these meetings and was impressed with the liberal and consistent vision of Islam these men and

women presented, one that emphasized verses of the Qur'an (*Qur'ân*) that speak of toleration and the high status of women. When members of the audience asked one speaker, a woman doctor, why, then, women could not drive in Saudi Arabia, the doctor gave the same response as had the radio interviewee: this rule comes from Saudi culture, not from Islam, because Islam teaches that women should work, trade, study, and so forth. She and her colleagues presented "Islam" as a set of rules and values, which even many Muslims failed to understand.

However opposed these two perspectives might seem – one that assumes that Islam has its own, rather backward culture, another that claims it to be independent of (and superior to) any particular culture – they share one feature: both perspectives assume a single object called "Islam." They often assume that we can find that object directly in scripture. Those urging a positive view of Islam quote verses of the Qur'an about the respect due to mothers, or a verse about "no compulsion in religion"; those seeking to condemn it quote verses about killing one's enemies. In both cases, scholars, religious leaders, and radio commentators move directly from a particular text to statements about Islam in general.

Now, if a public figure in Europe or North America were to infer from the Bible's accounts of divinely sanctioned massacres the idea that Judaism and Christianity preached genocide, Jews and Christians alike would point out that such texts must be seen in the broader compass of God's plans for his people. Some might treat such passages historically, others allegorically, still others as a message that was superseded by the gift of Jesus to humanity. The unfortunate public figure would be invited to look at the lives and teachings of Jews and Christians in order to understand how people work in the world with inspiration from their sacred texts. And that person's days in public life would be numbered.

But seldom do masses of listeners or readers condemn the same sort of inferences when Islam is the topic. The usual response is the one that I heard at the Unitarian church: defenders of the religion fall back on an

essentialist apologetics for Islam in general. This kind of response seldom satisfies an intelligent public for very long: how can you say that "Islam means peace" if so much violence seems to come from it? That response is not an unreasonable one, but it calls for an approach that makes everyday interpretations and practices more central to understanding Islam.

Here enter anthropologists, who specialize in examining ordinary lives. Although we (for I am one) used to spend most of our time focusing on people who eschewed the large-scale faiths, many of us now turn our comparative lenses on Muslims and Christians, as well as on Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, and Jews. And increasingly, we place those studies at the center of our discipline, and place anthropology at the center of Islamic studies. Or so goes the argument of this book, namely, that anthropologists, along with fellow-travelers from history and religious studies, have developed new ways of approaching Islam.

Those new ways start by taking seriously the idea that Islam is best seen as a set of interpretive resources and practices. From Islam's resources of texts, ideas, and methods comes the sense that all Muslims participate in a long-term and worldwide tradition. From Islam's practices of worshipping, judging, and struggling comes the capacity to adapt, challenge, and diversify. So far, so good, but specific to what I am calling a "new anthropology of Islam" is the insistence that the analysis begins with individuals' efforts to grapple with those resources and shape those practices in meaningful ways. Many anthropologists studying Islam today start from the socially embedded chains of human interpretation that link today's practices across societies and over time. Indeed, I choose to begin the next chapter with the trope of the *isnâd*, the chain of genealogical authentication of Islamic traditions. Whether with respect to politics, prayer, or purification, Muslims justify what they do by tracing contemporary understandings back to originating and authenticating acts.

This way of looking at Islam thus starts from people drawing on textual traditions to inform social practices, and it allows us to engage in two complementary analytical strategies. The first is "focusing

inward," by deepening our understanding of intentions, understandings, and emotions surrounding specific practices, usually with a great deal of attention to individual testimonies and histories. What does it mean for a woman or man to follow the command to "submit" that is contained within the very term *islâm*? Can one strengthen a sense of agency and power through submitting to God? How do leaders of social movements call on Islamic allegiances to mobilize followers?

But at the same time we follow a second strategy, one of "opening outward" to the social significance of, and conditions for, these religious practices. Often we do so across social boundaries, to broaden our understanding of why ideas and practices take this form here, and that form there. What features of the social environment – social movements, political pressures, new forms of communication – lead more individuals to seek meaning through submission in prayer? How do urban and rural settings in, say, Egypt present different possibilities and constraints from, say, Lebanon, Indonesia, or Germany?

This notion of what anthropology brings to the table is broad enough to include much of what historians, sociologists, and religious scholars do when they, too, keep in their analytical lenses both the contingent and contextual nature of interpretation and action, and the importance to Muslims of living in an Islamic world that transcends particular times and places. This new anthropology of Islam has placed an increased emphasis on religious texts and ideas, but only as they are understood and transmitted in particular times and places. Far from ignoring scripture, anthropology increasingly seeks to understand how particular Muslims come to understand and use particular passages. What distinguishes anthropologists from an older generation of textual scholars is that we are as interested in how a Pakistani farmer, an Egyptian engineer, or a French Muslim theologian sees the Qur'an as we are in the knowledge held by a traditional Muslim scholar.

Does affirming the multiplicity of interpretations mean that Muslims cannot share in this anthropology of Islam? I believe that this is far

from being the case. Muslims have always faced squarely the diversity of views within the tradition, recognizing, for example, that the distinct legal schools provide valid, though differing, answers to questions about theology, social life, and ritual practice. Although many Muslims would argue that their own particular view of their tradition is the correct one, such claims hardly make them any different from Christians or Jews, or, for that matter, lawyers or philosophers. Many Muslims would state further that only God knows which of many views is correct, and that only on the Day of Judgment will humans learn the answers – and that this is why the Prophet Muhammad promised two merits for the judge who makes the right decision and one merit for the judge who honestly arrives at the wrong one.[1]

But much of what everyday Muslims take from religion is not about grand questions of theology or jurisprudence, but about much more proximate matters, such as healing a child through reciting scripture, marrying or divorcing in an Islamic manner, or sacrificing correctly and efficaciously to God. As they have developed ways to do these things, Muslims living in particular places have adapted Islamic traditions to local values and constraints, and these adaptations have given rise to vigorous debates among Muslims over what is or is not correctly Islamic.

Let me give a brief example of how adaptations have created diversity, an example I will explore more fully in Chapter 6. Sufi members of devotional orders carried ideas about grace and sainthood throughout the world. In southern Asia, they added these ideas to pre-existing forms of devotion at shrines dedicated to holy people; so effective was the meld that Muslims could worship at these shrines together with people whom today we would call "Hindus." In Africa, these ideas fit into

[1] For a recent, sweeping account of the development of the Islamic legal tradition that takes full account of these legitimate, pluralizing processes, see Hallaq (2009). For a recent collection of essays around the questions of pluralism in Islam, see Hirji (2010).

a pre-existing social framework based on lineage structures, creating practically effective Sufi orders. Some engaged in large-scale production of cash crops; others carried out military campaigns against colonial powers.

Some observers, Muslim and non-Muslim, might find these developments to be contrary to the "true" Sufi spirit, or perhaps even contrary to Islam in general. What should the anthropologist say, be he or she Muslim or otherwise? I think that the student of such developments (Muslim or non-Muslim) ought to trace processes of adaptation and ought to illuminate the debates over authenticity thereby engendered. Indeed, anthropologists, historians, and religious scholars find themselves converging on these questions, even if, historically, each has only fitfully pursued this path.

Until relatively recently, many scholars had other disciplinary priorities, whether those were finding the culturally distinctive features of each society, tracing the development of political institutions, or examining the texts of Islamic "high culture." Few of us in anthropology emphasized the ways in which Muslims endeavor to transcend the limits of their own society even as they live in it, how they try to organize their lives around their understandings of "high texts," and how these texts – the Qur'an, the hadith (*hadîth*), and the wealth of devotional, legal, and political writings that Muslims have produced – are always grasped locally.

Things began to change in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when several younger anthropologists, including Dale Eickelman (1976, 1985), Michael Fischer (1980), Michael Gilsenan (1973, 1982), Lawrence Rosen (1984), James Siegel (1969), and Abdul Hamid el-Zein (1974), described the production of Islamic traditions within particular social contexts and through particular cultural understandings. They built on work carried out on patterns of authority in Muslim-majority societies, most prominently by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1949), Ernest Gellner (1969, 1980), and Clifford Geertz (1968), but also on other scholars of Islam, especially

Albert Hourani (1962) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1957). Others were carrying out parallel innovations in the anthropology of other religious traditions, among them Stanley Tambiah (1970) for Buddhism and Milton Singer (1972) for Hinduism.

For many of us beginning our graduate studies in the United States at that time, a major inspiration came from the comparative studies carried out by Clifford Geertz. In his *Islam Observed* (1968), Geertz set up a maximal cultural contrast – Morocco vis-à-vis Java – to try and grasp the specificities of Islam. Islam emerged not as what was left when you subtracted culture, but as a set of processes through which Muslims, rural and urban, North African and Southeast Asian, drew on elements of their shared tradition in ways that made sense to them, in that place and at that historical moment. A counterpoint was provided a bit later by Talal Asad (1986) – a second importance influence on my own thinking – when he urged us to focus our anthropological lenses not on a cultural matrix – the Moroccan culture that creates Moroccan Islam – but on the powerful religious figures who authorize some interpretations of the Islamic tradition and suppress others.

Some may see these two approaches – Geertz's cultural emphasis, Asad's political one – as irreconcilable opposites; I prefer to note that, taken together, they pointed toward something like what I have sketched above: an approach to Islamic traditions that takes seriously both religious thinking and social frameworks. I find that the analytical tensions and dissensions emerging from contemporary debates within anthropology – Is religion symbols or discipline? Is it coherence or fracture? – have themselves generated an impressive set of new work on the processes and practices surrounding the Islamic tradition. Over the past twenty-odd years, many of us have taken the twin tensions – one between cultural specificity and a shared Islamic tradition; the other between an Islam of individual creativity and one authorized by religious leaders – as generating our empirical and analytical framework. The framework has "worked" analytically because it corresponds to the lived conditions of

many Muslim believers, for whom Islam lies between the particular and the shared, and between the creative and the imposed.

More was to come in the anthropology of Islam, however, because we also began to take better account of transnational connections and global movements, dimensions downplayed in the work carried out in the late 1960s and 1970s. For many of us, these connections surfaced in the midst of our fieldwork. I was working in the Gayo highlands of Sumatra in the 1980s when I was astonished to find that in 1928, a handful of religious poets had their work printed in Cairo as *al-Tafsir al-Gayo*, a Gayo scriptural interpretation written in Arabic script. This book was the first, and for decades the only, printed Gayo-language text (and still the only one in Arabic script). The religious poets working in the highlands were able to have their work printed in Egypt because they belonged to active networks of study and publication devoted to promoting modernist views of Islam. These Malay- and Arabic-language networks stretched from Cairo and Mecca to Johor and Java.

By the 1990s, then, two intellectual developments had begun to define a new anthropology of Islam: a politically aware focus on religious interpretations and practices, and a historically aware focus on broad spatial patterns and movements. These two developments made possible a better grasping of the object that is Islam, in which making connections across time and space are intrinsic to its epistemology. They provided new ways for anthropologists to work with scholars in religious studies and history, and for colleagues working in different parts of the world, often in societies once deemed marginal to the field of Islamic Studies, to collaborate. Scholars working in India and the Malay world talked with those working in Africa, and together charted Indian Ocean crossings and communications that also brought in students of Oman and Yemen.[2]

[2] For a recent study in history and anthropology across the Indian Ocean, see Ho (2006); a recent collection edited by Simpson and Kresse (2008) provides additional perspectives.

Scholars working in Pakistan and Algeria talked with those working in Britain and France, and charted continuing post-colonial institutional connections.[3] Islam could no longer plausibly be equated with "Middle Eastern Studies" or viewed solely through an Arabic-language lens (or at best an Arabic–Persian–Turkish one) but had to be seen as a set of processes and practices, texts and interpretations, that were constantly in conflict with, and also adapted to, culturally specific ways of living and thinking located around the globe.[4]

In each of the following chapters I approach a set of practices and processes: learning, sacrificing, or mobilizing. In each case I start with shared sets of ideas and methods in order to provide a broad-brush sense of the texts and traditions on which Muslims draw. Then I examine divergent pathways of interpretation and practice in order to exemplify the latitude available within Islam. I often begin with my own work in Southeast Asia and in Europe because doing so allows me to draw on my own engagement with these issues. I then look to colleagues working in other places (or other times), to illustrate both (empirically) the range of possibilities of Islamic interpretation and practice, and (analytically) the broad applicability of the approach outlined here. I try to provide three levels of analysis for readers: an unpacking of the basic features of Islamic religious life, an exposition of the processes that generate diversity across Muslim societies, and an example of the understandings that come from the kind of close-in and comparative perspective characterizing contemporary anthropology.

The scope of this volume seems vast – multiple practices, many societies – but in fact it is quite restricted. It is not an exhaustive survey but an analytical exposition in which I draw on some studies but, regrettably, leave out many others. It is also not about the entire lives of Muslims

[3] On Britain–South Asia, see Werbner (2003); on France–Algeria see Silverstein (2004).
[4] This point was made early and elegantly by Richard Bulliet (1994).

but about a certain range of activities, those in which women and men orient themselves toward their sense of a religious tradition. Consequently, I have relatively little to say about certain other important areas of anthropological concern. For example, anthropologists working in the Middle East have, for very good reasons, made tribes and politics central to their work (Abu-Lughod 1989; Caton 2005; Dresch and Haykel 1995; Shryock 1997), but tribal politics is little discussed here. Again, major recent contributions to our understandings of gender and sexuality have come from anthropologists working in Muslim contexts (Abu-Lughod 1986; Boellstorff 2005; Peletz 1996); these issues arise here in discussions of key Islamic practices, such as in Chapter 3 on practices of piety and in Chapter 7 on judging, in full awareness that these discussions fall far short of adequately examining gender and sexuality dimensions of these Muslims' lives. Finally, the very wealth of work in the past decade prevents me from citing all the important studies in what I am calling a new anthropology of Islam, even on the themes discussed here. For all the omissions I beg my colleagues' understanding.

I begin, as do many Muslims in their own lives, with learning.