
Introduction

Muslim societies encompass widely diverse economic, political and social structures and relations. In spite of their diversity, their members share the basic core beliefs and practices which Islam sets forth in the 'five pillars'. They enjoin the believers to bear witness to the oneness of God, to perform the five daily prayers, to fast during the month of Ramadan, to pay annual alms and, if possible, to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once. These fundamental elements of belief and practice endow Islam with its essential unity, for they are agreed upon by all Muslims as norms which they, with varying degrees of success, seek to fulfil. The degree of emphasis put on each one of them is, nevertheless, highly variable throughout Muslim communities, societies and traditions. Beyond these minimal and formal requirements, diversity reigns. In addition to the core beliefs and a number of common Islamic symbols, there are numerous ideological and practical accretions present in all Muslim societies which account for the actual diversity of Islam. Muslim societies thus differ not only in their political, economic and social-structural arrangements but also in their ritual practices and religious institutions. Orientalists and anthropologists have for long struggled with the problem of how best to conceptualise and account for the observable diversity of religious belief and practice in various Muslim societies and communities.

Students of Islam and the processes of Islamisation – both Muslims and non-Muslims alike – have always conceptualised this diversity in terms of a dichotomy between belief and ritual practice expressed in religious texts and exegetical comments of recognised religious scholars and actual belief and practice of specific Muslim communities. This dichotomy was first conceptualised in historical terms and the actual beliefs and practices which deviated from the texts and their authoritative interpretations were seen as a mixture of Islamic elements and the

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local lore surviving from the pre-Islamic times. This historical view was gradually replaced by the conceptualisation of the same dichotomy in terms of the distinction between the Great and Little traditions formulated by Robert Redfield (1956) which had at least the advantage that it did not make unwarranted assumptions about the historical origin of various beliefs and practices. It too, however, had its disadvantages. Many scholars found the distinction between the two broadly defined traditions too vague in the absence of institutional religious organisation in Islam which could unambiguously define its Great tradition and suggested other ways of conceptualising the observable diversity in Islamic belief and practice. Thus one type of Islam, variously described as true, pristine or pure faith and orthodox opinion and classified as scriptural, normative, orthodox, formal or official Islam was contrasted with popular, alternative, folk, local, rural or informal Islam, Islamic heterodoxy, aberrant practice, superstitious accretions or rural folk religion (Ahmed 1976: 88; Waardenburg 1978, 1979; Gellner 1981; Graham 1983: 61–2; Stewart 1985; Kielstra 1985; Denny 1985). All these terms, and a host of others which have been used to express the same basic dichotomy, do not obviate the difficulties and drawbacks which the conceptualisation of the diversity of Islam in dichotomous terms entails.

The first of these difficulties is that many forms of Islam only uncomfortably straddle the conceptual boundary between its two basic types. For example the Shi'ites cannot simply be seen as representing a kind of popular Islam when they themselves claim to represent true Islam and deny that the Sunnis do so. Similarly Sufism – at least in the form it attained through the influence of al-Ghazzālī – cannot simply be classified as popular Islam when the Sufis themselves claim that they represent a more profound Islam than the *'ulamā* in their emphasis on Islam's inner aspects and the importance of religious experience (Waardenburg 1978: 323).

These two examples should suffice to illustrate that to conceptualise the variety of Islamic belief and practice in terms of the Great tradition of a world religion and the Little tradition of local, regional and village culture is both simplistic and unilluminating. The reason is that it is as much the Great as the Little tradition which is problematic (cf. Rahman 1985: 195–7). The Great tradition is not simply something that has been agreed among scholars but always something that has been agreed among some specific scholars in a specific place and at a specific time (cf. Eickelman 1981a: 12). In consequence, one could probably better speak of various Great traditions than simply the Great tradition.

Even if the Great tradition is as problematic as the Little one, the

latter is, nevertheless, always defined negatively. Its very existence is generated in a discourse which reflects the unequal distribution of knowledge and power. It is a discourse in which only the knowledgeable and powerful have a voice and are in a position to formulate the dichotomy by opposing what they believe and practise to what the others believe and practise. Those who are denied the knowledge and power are not in a position to participate actively in the discourse. The conceptualisation of the dichotomy is then not only elitist (cf. Stirrat 1984: 206) but also inevitably arbitrary. The Little tradition is thus constituted as passive, non-autonomous and above all non-sovereign, not only with regard to the Great tradition but also with regard to itself. As it is the Great tradition that defines and the Little one that is defined, the former becomes inevitably the source of knowledge about the latter. The relationship between the two is thus radically a matter of power. The Little tradition, being passive, only accepts from the Great tradition.

This conceptualisation of the relationship between the two traditions is the function of the ‘orientalist search for an ahistorical Islamic “essence”’ (Eickelman 1981a: 1; 1981b: 203). It becomes, however, dubious, when we consider the historical development of Islam: ‘There was a time when Sufism was unheard of in Islam. Then there was a time when Sufism arose and was generally opposed by the ‘*Ulamā*’. Then Sufism multiplied into various types and engulfed the entire body-social of Islam. Lastly, we witness a time when the attempt has been to reform and reinterpret Sufism, and it may well be in the process of transformation’ (Rahman 1985: 195).

Whatever justification there may exist for conceptualising Islam in dichotomous terms, the manner of the construction of the dichotomy has important consequences for the way in which research into the diversity of belief and ritual practice within Islam is conducted. In practice, research is often limited almost exclusively to noting what a specific community or society has accepted from the Great tradition, as it is formulated in standard religious texts, and how its members deviate from it (Eickelman 1981b: 202). R. Tapper commented on this widespread practice in his observation that many ethnographers of Middle Eastern societies are simply ‘content to record that their subjects are Muslims and note ways in which their customs differ from Islamic prescriptions’ (1984: 217). Even if many anthropologists have gone much further than that in their studies of Islam as actually practised in specific settings, they have mostly concentrated on particular elements of Islamic Little tradition such as saints, shrines and spirits (e.g. Geertz 1968; Gellner 1969; Gilsenan 1973, 1982; Crapanzano 1973; Eickelman

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1976).¹ The result of such research is to eradicate the plurality of differences among Muslims in the interest of one difference, that of setting the Great tradition off from everything else. It results in the formulation of evaluative judgements of religious processes which are not always sociologically adequate. Turner suggests that the relationship between scholarly religion and its popular manifestations may be understood

as an interaction between social groups interpreting their practices by reference to common formulae. Popular religion is not historically merely a vulgarisation of the Islamic mysticism of Ibn Al-Arabi and Al-Ghazzali since intellectualised mysticism and popular religion have always stood side-by-side oriented to different clientele with different social and religious interests. This is not to ignore the fact that the general societal status of popular religion has been fundamentally transformed by decolonisation, puritan reformism and national ideology . . . [I]t is more accurate to regard popular and official religion as a form of differentiation and specialisation of religious services relevant to different lay markets than to treat 'mass religiosity' as the contaminated offspring of pure religious consciousness. (B. Turner 1985: 56)

Although the various terms which have been used to express the basic dichotomy in Islamic belief and practice are ostensibly employed as descriptive and classificatory devices, they are, nevertheless, always evaluative. A belief or practice is orthodox or unorthodox, scriptural or popular, or whatever, not of itself but only from a specific point of view which is always a view of those who are at home with texts and, in consequence, tend to see Islam from above. Anthropologists are at home in villages and, in consequence, tend to see Islam from below (Gellner 1981: 99). This is, of course, the reason why they have never been happy with orientalists' habitual perception of the dichotomy, because their experience has taught them that a point of view is never the only one, and because it is part of their accepted wisdom that to arbitrate on true and correct points of view may be appropriate for theologians but not for students of religion as a cultural system.

The diversity of religious beliefs and practices in various Muslim societies has, however, been a problem not only for the students of Islam but for the Muslim community itself. In spite of the fact that Islam does not recognise any institutional religious authority or organisation entrusted with defining the 'official' religious view, the relationship between 'official' and 'popular' religion has not disappeared but has rather become more subtle and intricate. The problem of a basic

¹ These studies do not, of course, exhaust the anthropological interest in Islam as practised and understood in specific settings. For the assessment of other major trends in the study of Islam in local contexts see Eickelman 1981.

dichotomy within Islam is perceived by the Muslim community as a fundamental one of juridical and theological nature. Ahmed, who looks at the diversity of Muslim beliefs and practices from within Islam itself, rejects the view of those who have concluded that there is not one Islam but various islams (El-Zein 1974: 172; 1977: 231, 242–4; Mortimer 1982), and sees the diversity of Islam in terms of a universal and unchanging ideal with a varied and changing interpretation throughout the Muslim world (Ahmed 1988: 4–5). Waardenburg applies the term ‘normative’ Islam to this ‘absolute religious ideal’ which continues ‘to exist largely beyond the daily needs and ideals of the lived religion’ (1978: 331). According to him, this concept ‘can be used without prejudice for all Muslim groups who appeal to Islam as their norm for individual and social life’ (Ibid.: 329). ‘The normative Islam is what Muhammad as a prophet and leader of the community instituted as Islamic religion, especially through the revelation he brought (the Koran) and the example he gave in words and deeds (the *Sunna*)’ (ibid.: 327).

The normative Islam constitutes and has always constituted the valid Islam of the religious scholars who have specialised knowledge of revelation and religion (ibid.: 333). It is precisely this fact which enables Ahmed to say that ‘it is true that in the thought of Muslim scholars and in their texts there is clarity, and a broad consensus regarding the ideal, it is also true that the way Muslims order their lives is sometimes far from the ideal’ (Ahmed 1988: 5).

The classification of the observable beliefs and practices in terms of ideal norms and a deviation from them is of course again evaluative, and as such is of particular use to those who have a practical interest in the beliefs and practices in the sense that they want to do something about them. It need not only be the proselytisers who want to disseminate the ideal. It may also be theologians who want to condemn or justify an existing practice. To do that, they have to evaluate it by placing it on an agreed-upon classificatory scale, one end of which is defined by the norm and the other one by complete disregard of that norm. Normative Islam has been invoked for practical purposes throughout Islamic history in numerous waves of purification which have been an integral part of the Islamic tradition from its very beginning. For example, Ibn Taimiyya (A.D. 1263–1328) invoked it to condemn and suppress ‘popular’ practices among Muslims in his time (Waardenburg 1978: 317). It was invoked in a similar way by various reformers of Islam in the last century, as well as by the present-day fundamentalist movements which call for a return to the true Islam of the Koran and *sunna* – the sayings and actions of the Prophet and his companions.

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For the student of religion who does not want to change, condemn or justify existing beliefs and practices but to understand what they mean to those to whom they belong, there is little point in classifying them according to how closely or remotely they approximate the ideal. If what the people believe and practise is the only ideal they themselves know, then in terms of their knowledge of the world it is also the only reality. If we then compare their beliefs and practices with an ideal known only to the analyst but not to them, we compare something that exists and is real with something that does not exist and is unreal in the world we are trying to understand. Surely that amounts to committing a categorical mistake. This point should be borne in mind. When I occasionally compare Berti belief and practice with 'normative' Islam, I am making a comparison which the Berti themselves cannot make.

Even if the evaluative connotations of the various terms used to express the basic dichotomy in Islam are disregarded, and even if they are taken in their purely descriptive sense, another uneasiness about them remains. It stems from the fact that they are still habitually used to classify systems of belief and ritual practice of whole communities or societies as if these systems were undifferentiated monolithic wholes – a view which is again blatantly contradicted by the experience of anthropological fieldwork. Recent anthropological studies of Islam as it is practised in specific local settings indicate that there are opposing conceptions of Islam in almost every studied locale. Eickelman refers to them as universalistic conceptions which are explicit and more general in their implications, and particularistic conceptions which are largely implicit and tied to particular social contexts (Eickelman 1981b: 203; cf. also El-Zein 1977: 242–3). Given this situation, the concepts of 'norm' or 'orthodoxy' cannot so easily be swept under the carpet for they are indispensable to the understanding of the lived religion or 'practised' Islam (Waardenburg 1978: 322). They need, however, to be seen as concepts which have their place within any particular form of Islam as it is practised and lived in any particular community or society, rather than concepts which can be applied to Islam as a whole and then used to judge and evaluate its particular forms and expressions.

In the villages in which anthropologists are at home, people are often illiterate and their adherence to the Muslim faith and their belonging to the wider community of Islam is proclaimed through other symbols of the divine word than the Book. In his discussion of Islam as it is lived and practised by the Berbers of the central High Atlas, Gellner points out that the word, when incarnated, becomes flesh (1981: 117) and the physical or spiritual succession from the Prophet or early Muslim holy men becomes a more important form of legitimation than either the

book, which is beyond the reach of the illiterate, or the wider Islamic consensus formulated in the urban centres, from which they are cut off by a hostile relationship. In the eyes of the more learned urban folk this is of course heretical and sinful. What is the view from below? Gellner mentions two views. On the one hand he says that the tribesmen

know how they are seen and they do not repudiate the judgement. At the same time, they do not in any way desire to opt out of the wider community of Islam. Their attitude really is that of Saint Augustine: Lord, make me pure, but not yet. They recognise standards of purity in terms of which their own tribal society fails, yet at the same time wish to remain as they are, indefinitely. They are quite aware of the conflict and contradiction, yet at the same time the contradiction is not articulated clearly or stressed. (Gellner, 1981: 117)

On the other hand he says that the holy lineages

must serve tribal, non-urban ends, but they must also link the tribes with a wider and urban-oriented ideal of Islam. They serve both local and tribal needs and universal Islamic identification. They hamper the diffusion of good and proper Islam, in a way, by giving the tribesman [sic] an excuse for pretending that they are *already* good Muslims, and that they already possess the institutional framework of faith; and yet at the same time, they keep the door open for the propagation of 'purer' Islam by endorsing it in the course of those very practices in which they deviate from it. (Gellner 1981: 130; cf. also Gellner 1969: 298–9.)

One of course cannot consider one's beliefs and practices as heretical and sinful and at the same time consider oneself a good Muslim. But this does not mean that Gellner is wrong in at least one of his characterisations of the Berbers' own views. These two views can easily co-exist in the same community or society, reflecting the varying awareness of its particular members of the alternative to their belief and practice. Such variation has probably been present throughout Islam's history and has been generated through pilgrimages to Mecca as well as through local and regional pilgrimages at which people from different cultures and social settings meet and which function as important channels for the flow of information across cultural and social boundaries (Gilsenan 1973: 17). Migrants, traders and itinerant scholars also disseminated similar information (Ahmed 1976: 85). The awareness of alternatives to local belief and practice has of course increased recently. Nowadays hardly any community is effectively cut off from the wider society of which it is a part. Not only is it linked with the wider society or state through economic and political ties, but it is also linked to its beliefs and ritual practices. The awareness of them is facilitated by the spread of the radio and formal school education which disseminate the views of those who have the power to interpret authoritatively the Islamic faith and who see themselves as guardians of the orthodoxy, at least as it is

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defined by the educated elite of each particular state who control the means of communication.

Different members may hold different views about the purity or deviance of beliefs and practices current in their society. This suggests again that the image of the co-existence of Great and Little traditions in Islam, or of normative Islam and the deviations from it, is too simplistic and results from looking at the situation from above, from within the Great tradition or from the 'normative' pole of the dichotomy. Seen from above, a particular society or community may be cut off or differ from the wider Islamic consensus and hence be seen as aberrant or deviant. Nevertheless, it may have itself a high degree of its own normative consensus through which it defines itself as orthodox. Or, more likely, the same differentiation between orthodoxy and deviance may be expressed within it. What may be seen as orthodox by some within the community may be seen as aberrant and deviant by others. Instead of thinking in terms of basic polarities between the Great tradition or 'normative' Islam and beliefs and practices which deviate from it, a more appropriate image is that of nesting segments of belief and practice. At each 'level of segmentation' what is and what is not proper Islam may be disputed. Gaddafi has restricted the legitimacy of Islamic belief and practice to the Koran alone and denied the authority of the *sunna*, for human interpretation is heavily involved in these orally transmitted traditions. This view presumably constitutes the Islamic orthodoxy in Libya. Yet a theological commission in Saudi Arabia, under the chairmanship of the *qāḍī* of Medina, found his views guilty of apostasy (Gellner 1981: 62).

Similar disagreements pervade all 'levels of segmentation' from the widest Muslim community, where the split between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims is their most obvious manifestation, down to any particular Muslim group or society. The point is that 'orthodoxy' and 'deviance', the 'true belief' and 'superstition', are not simply descriptive and evaluative labels which can be nonproblematically appended by the analyst to particular views and practices. They are concepts which belong to the actors themselves and, like their other concepts, are part of the discourse which we call their culture.

This book is an anthropological study of the 'practical religion' of the Berti people of the Northern Darfur Province of the Republic of the Sudan. As such, it is a description of the discourse about belief and ritual practice in which the Berti are engaged and in which the questions about what is a true belief and what is an erroneous one, and what is an appropriate ritual and what is a superstitious act, are contested issues.

It has already been mentioned that in rural societies as well as among

certain strata of urban population there is a shift of legitimation from the Book or the abstract consensus to legitimation grounded in physical or spiritual success from the Prophet or his successors and early Muslim holy men. In the wider Sudanese society, to which the Berti are linked through economic and political ties, this kind of legitimation is all pervasive and Sufi orders or brotherhoods are a characteristic feature of the Sudanese Islam (Trimingham 1949: 195–241; Daly 1985). The Khatmiyya order and the Ansar, the spiritual descendants of the supporters of the Mahdi, form the basis of the two most important political parties in the Sudan (Warburg 1985; Al-Shahi 1987), and the religious leaders who come from the established families associated with the Khatmiyya and the Mahdist movement have always played an important role in Sudanese politics (Voll 1972). Unlike most northern Sudanese, the Berti villagers do not follow any particular Sufi orders and, in fact, many of them are unaware of their existence. Only a few Berti belong to the Tijāniyya brotherhood which has spread in Darfur since the 1950s (O’Fahey 1980: 178, n. 31). Until now the brotherhood has remained restricted to towns and large market centres, recruiting its members mostly from among merchants, who are much more directly integrated to the wider Sudanese society than the predominantly illiterate villagers. Thus, among the Berti, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the Tijāniyya order is associated with the wealthy and the politically powerful (on Tijāniyya see Abun-Nasr 1965, and on Tijāniyya in the Sudan Trimingham 1949: 236–9).

Although the religious leaders (*fugarā*, sg. *fakī*) perform important rituals on behalf of the community, they do not have an importance in Berti society parallel to that of the shaikhs of the various Sufi orders, or the *igurramen*, saints and marabouts of North Africa. They achieve their status solely by virtue of their learning and not by virtue of their descent. They do not possess or control divine grace (*baraka*), are not guardians of saintly shrines and are not seen as being any closer to God than the members of the community whom they serve. They have to have the knowledge of the Koran to be recognised as *fugarā* but that in itself does not lend them a special closeness to God. It can merely facilitate it if it is used as an instrument of devotion for, in the Berti view, closeness to God is achieved solely through piety. This, in principle is accessible to anybody who ‘fears God’ and follows the prescriptions and obeys the prohibitions which were revealed by God to his Prophet.

Many orientalist (Gibb and Brown 1957; Gibb 1969) and Muslim jurist-theologians (cf. Waardenburg 1978: 317) have seen the emergence and spread of Sufism as a move from the pure, scriptural Islam

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towards popular religion characterised by its syncretic mixture of Islamic beliefs and practices with various local beliefs, practices and customs. On this view, the Berti Islam – at least as far as its professed beliefs go – could be seen as closer to the ‘scriptural’ end of the spectrum, which insists on the equality of believers and does not recognise any intermediaries between them and God, than to the hierarchical nature of Sufism. It would also appear to go against the ecstatic nature of Sufism in its insistence on the Book as the ultimate legitimisation of particular beliefs and practices. The overall picture is, however, not that simple. For a start, there is no agreement among all Berti on what exactly the Book is. For those with school education and some *fugarā*, the Book is the Koran. For the illiterate villagers and some *fugarā* anything that is written constitutes the Book. On this view, practices described in various astrological books and manuals on the ‘magical’ uses of Koranic verses are as orthodox as the beliefs and practices of strictly Koranic origin.

My discussion of the Berti discourse about what is and what is not proper Islam concentrates on practices and their underlying beliefs which the Berti classify as *‘awāid* (sg. *‘āda*, custom) and which they conceptually distinguish from practices classified as *dīn* (religion). The vitality and dynamism of Islam lies in part in its receptivity to local custom and its ability to incorporate diverse customary practices. This ability of Islam to adapt itself to local traditions can be traced back to its very origin. Although Islam brought about a radical change in Arab society, it did not outlaw all the pre-Islamic customs but, on the contrary, incorporated many of them into its own system of law. This adaptability to local custom became even more significant when Islam spread gradually into areas with cultures radically different from that in which it originated. The Islamic scholars and jurists understood the important role of custom in the local application of Islamic law (*sharī‘a*), and local custom (*‘āda* or *‘urf*) was recognised as an ancillary source of *sharī‘a* provided it was currently and commonly practised by the Muslim community and did not contradict the explicit provisions of the Koran and *sunna* (Al-Awa 1973). Not only have practices that did not manifestly contradict the basic tenets of Islamic belief often been tolerated or even redefined and sanctioned during the process of Islamisation, but also the survival of customary practices which clearly contradict Islamic law, notably those concerning marriage or inheritance, is a well-known feature of many overtly Muslim societies. The Berti concept of *‘āda* is, however, different from the customary law which persists in Muslim societies alongside Islamic law proper. The Berti refer to their ‘customary law’ and other customs which distinguish