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*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 1984; 18; 293
DOI: 10.1177/006996678401800208

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://cis.sagepub.com
Discussion

I

For a folk-theology and theological anthropology of Islam

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Can we think of Islam as a single unified tradition, or does the historicity of the religious experience of Islam contribute vitally to our understanding of it? This question has great relevance for defining the relation between text and context in the case of all religions that may be said to have ‘scripture’ in the generic sense, a term that I leave undefined for the moment. Studies on Islam in diverse cultures and in different periods of history have testified to the importance of the Qur’ān and adherence to the five pillars of Islam in the everyday life of Muslims. Beyond this, however, considerable diversity in belief and practice has been observed so as to pose the question: Does a single, true Islam exist at all? Let us examine this question in the context of Islam in Indian society.

The problem of the diversity of observed Islam has been posed most sharply by Imtiaz Ahmad and his colleagues in the several volumes edited by him (1973, 1976, 1981). We take up here specifically the issues relating to religion and ritual (Ahmad 1981a and 1981b).

Ahmad has tried to show the limitations of an exclusively textual understanding of Islam. He points out that the orientalists have dismissed the ‘folk’ religion of the Muslims as of little relevance to the understanding of Islam. When they are interested in it, it is only to point to its divergence from normative Islam. He has perhaps overstressed the uniqueness of the syncretic elements in Indian Islam, for these have not only been reported from every society where Islam has spread but also in its original home. In fact, anthropological literature abounds in explanations of these apparent departures from the Islamic ideals, either in terms of psychological needs, compulsions of the unconscious, or exigencies of the socio-political structure (see, e.g.,

Contributions to Indian sociology (n.s.) 18, 2 (1984)
SAGE Publications New Delhi/London
Bujra 1971; Crapanzano 1973; Geertz 1960, 1968, 1973; Gellner 1981; Gilsenan 1973). Ahmad and his associates are tolerant and perhaps even indulgent towards these syncretic elements and use simplistic functional explanations for their appearance and persistence.

Taking a somewhat polemic stance against not only Ahmad but also the entire anthropological understanding of Islam is the historian, Francis Robinson (1983). He argues with some force that Islam offers a pattern of perfection, which is readily discernable in the Qur’an and the life of the prophet, and provides comprehensive rules of conduct for every Muslim. Further, Robinson states that knowledge of this perfect pattern is spread through holy men and by ‘contact with cultures . . . in which Islamic knowledge is more widely spread and manifest’; moreover, ‘such contact often seems to draw men towards higher Islamic standards’ (ibid.: 192–93).

For scholars like Robinson, the course of Islamic history is clear. As knowledge of this perfect Islamic pattern spreads in countries like India, the process of Islamisation will sweep away the various ‘dubious’ practices that have crept into local Islamic cultures. This, further, is not only a question of fact but also of value.

At the first instance, it may seem that Robinson and Ahmad are on opposite sides of the debate. After all, Robinson is quite unequivocal in his statement that the high Islamic standard being set by holy men ought to be followed by Muslims. Hence a stern admonition to Ahmad and his like ‘. . . there will be Muslims who will know that whether they like it or not, this is what they ought to be striving to achieve’ (ibid.: 192, emphasis added).

Ahmad, on the other hand, has defended syncretism on the ground that people take a pragmatic approach to religion. However, behind this apparent divergence between the views of our two authors, there is a remarkable similarity in the manner in which they construct their basic system of oppositions. Both believe that normative or orthodox Islam constitutes a single pattern of perfection which seems to be in the nature of an unchanging essence.

The first point to be noted here is that it is a gross misrepresentation of the modern scholarship on textual understanding of Islam to argue that there is a consensus of opinion that the Qur’an reveals a single pattern of perfection. It certainly has the status of scripture, but the notion of scripture in Islam is very different from that in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the latter, the primary meaning of scripture is the idea of divinely revealed or written word of God that has been subjected further to a process of canonisation. In contrast, the Islamic tradition has been well described by Graham (1982):

The Qur’anic view is that there have been many ‘scriptures’ (kutub, in the sense of sacred and authoritative, divine revelations), of which the Qur’an (‘Recitation’) itself is the final and most complete. All these scriptures have come to the various peoples of history as God’s very word, taken in
each case from his heavenly scripture (*al-kitāb* or *umm al-kitāb*, ‘Mother of Scripture’). This fundamentally generic notion of scripture has not diminished the Muslim’s consciousness of the particular ultimacy of their own scripture, but this does give to verbal revelations and scriptural texts a clear status as characteristic, recurring phenomena in the history of God’s dealing with humankind.

As I shall try to show later, the notion that scripture has been revealed by God earlier and in different forms has been elaborated in folk theologies to give very different meaning and content to the notion of Islamic perfection, than either Robinson or Ahmad seem prepared to admit.

For the moment, however, let us return to the Qur’an. This text is not only the source of law for the devout Muslim but is revered as the evidence of the eternal breaking through time. Through this text, the transcendent enters human history. But precisely because the revelation includes a holy and elevated but nevertheless human listener, and a language that is spoken by humans, the revelation of God has to be interpreted. It is surely not accidental that the chief Qur’anic science has been *tafsīr*, the phrase-by-phrase exegetical interpretation. After the great exponent of this art al-Tabari in the ninth century, the Qur’an has been the subject of continuous reinterpretation. Commentaries have been written in every century, and continue to be written. In view of the ongoing tradition of exegetical interpretation in the constitution of Islamic knowledge, it would be very difficult to maintain that the differences in interpretation are minor. To write a new commentary on a text is to suggest that existing commentaries are inadequate. Now whether we argue that a single interpretation is correct, and all others false, or whether we accept the plurality of meaning as inherent in any act of interpretation, is, I suspect, related to our philosophical moorings. Robinson has great faith that all differences of interpretation would be reduced to minor differences, although this is more a matter of faith than demonstration with him. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1980) the distinguished scholar of Islam, on the other hand argues:

The writing of formal analytical or exegetical *tafsīr*, however, is but one among several ways in which Muslims have set forth one or another specific interpretation of their scripture, or of specific verses within it. Every theologian, jurist, mystic, heresiarch, nationalist, agitator, philosopher, has tended over the centuries, and across the Muslim world, to incorporate the interpretation of the Qur’an . . . . And indeed every individual worshipper, quoting this or that verse from the Book in his daily prayers, as he must, sees and feels in that verse something that is in part a function of the meaning for it purveyed to him by his milieu . . . .

Thus when we shift from the meaning of the Qur’an as a source of law to that as a source of the entire religious life, we can see more readily that
meaning is not to be interpreted once, and correctly, but continually reinterpreted, for meanings assigned to the word of God by human efforts can only be approximations.

In thinking of 'holy men' as constituting a single, undifferentiated category, Robinson has done less than justice to the tension between the interpretations of the Qur'ān in terms of their literal and figurative meanings. After all, the distinction between clear and equivocal verses of the Qur'ān is intrinsic to the Islamic tradition and the whole science of elucidation (ilm-al-Bayān) addresses itself to the question of an analysis of figures of speech in sacred texts. The tension between knowledge through literal meaning and faith has arisen often in Islamic history, as between the ulama and the sufi saints. Disputes have thus arisen as to whether the passage relating to the ascent of Mohammad to heaven is to be literally or metaphorically interpreted. The whole distinction between the zāhirī and bāṭīnī meanings, and whether it is the jurist or the man of faith who is more likely to find the hidden meaning of the speech of God cannot be dismissed. These tensions are vital to our understanding of the Qur'ān as a sacred and not merely a jural text. Indeed, the variety of attitudes to revelation is linked to the varieties of religious leadership within Islam as argued cogently by Fazalbhoy (1984) and Troll (1984). Robinson's innocence on this whole range of issues is charmingly portrayed in the physical analogies that he uses to depict the process by which Islamic knowledge spreads. For example: 'However, I prefer to think of them (the holy men) as the network of arteries and veins along which life-giving blood of knowledge has flowed through time, and along which it is pumped through the corners of the Islamic world' (ibid.: 191). This whole view of knowledge as substance, and the holy men as neutral vehicles, is difficult to sustain or defend in view of the legitimacy accorded to the science of interpretation in the Islamic tradition.

The labelling of knowledge as Islamic, without due regard to the content of this knowledge, obscures many important issues. In different periods of history, as in different kinds of societies, the attitude to folk theologies within the Islamic tradition has varied. For instance, the use of Hindu symbols and the evolution of new forms of devotion in sufiana music and poetry in medieval India propagated a different way of approaching God than the enunciation of Islamic ideals in the writings and speeches of the leaders of the tabliki jamāts among many Muslim communities today. It is the task of the social scientist to address the problem in terms of the social conditions which bring about these variations in emphasis in the arrangement of ideas as also in the social roles. One cannot dismiss the engagement of medieval Muslim scholars with Hindu symbols as mere guises by which they attracted Hindus to the Islamic faith. This is surely reading history backwards and seeing the concerns of the present as providing motivational forces to the actors of the past.

The intellectual process of labelling as a substitute for delineating the
arrangement of relations mars the contributions of Ahmad and his associates also. It is difficult to see why saint-worship is dismissed as un-Islamic without going into the structure of belief within which the reverence is given to a pir. This is rightly criticised by Robinson. The same is the case with the customary practices of protection from evil. Without looking into the question of how people explain these and whether there is a difference in the manner in which Hindus and Muslims view magic, the enquiry is foreclosed by providing a simple label. Incidentally, the existence of the evil practices of magicians and the like is testified by the Qur’ān itself and classified as sifli amal. We should see how this notion is developed and what role the text plays in providing protection against evil. The practice of using certain passages in the Qur’ān by inscribing them on protective amulets has been reported from many parts of the world. As Cassirer (1955) has pointed out, the word in the Qur’ān may be treated as a physical entity as much as a symbolic one. We need many more studies on the manner in which the sacred text is integrated into a variety of religious beliefs and rituals and one hopes we can move from the atomistic approach of labelling items of belief and rituals in terms of received dichotomies—Islamic vs. un-Islamic, elite vs. folk Islam, great vs. little traditional, orthodox vs. heterodox (see Martin 1981–82). If boundaries have to be found these must reflect the conclusion of an analysis rather than its premises. In different periods of history, the attitudes of the Muslim communities to orthodoxy have varied as have the boundaries of the ummah, or the community of believers. But it is precisely our task to find how these boundaries are constructed, a task in which we may be hindered by the application of our preconceived categories.

It seems to me that both Robinson and Ahmad come to identify orthodox Islam with the practice of the elite. It is not surprising that instances of departures from this normative level are always drawn from the religion of the villager, the illiterate, and the women, as for example in Saiyed’s (1981) descriptions of Moharram. Does an acceptance of normative Islam necessarily commit us to the view that the practice of the poor and the illiterate is always faulty? Incidentally, the movement to fundamentalism in Islam as witnessed in Islamic countries today contrasts completely with the discovery in modern Christianity that the practices of these very sections of society were suppressed in the history of Christianity not because of the truth of revelation but because of the exigencies of power within the organised ecclesiastical hierarchy. Can we think of a theoretical framework which need not commit us irrevocably to the point of view of the religious elite and which may be capable of recognising the active role of the community of believers in sustaining the ideals of Islam?

Let me suggest that between the contrasting dichotomy of elite and folk Islam, or theology and anthropology, we insert the mediating terms, folk-theology and theological anthropology.

The sociology of Islam must apply itself seriously to the investigation of
of folk theologies, on the one hand, and the meanings and use of scripture in
the everyday life of the Muslim, on the other. We must not assume that the
folk theologies cannot match the abstraction and cosmological implications
of formal theologies. I mention only two directions in which folk theologies
may be seen as complementary to formal theology. The first is that revelation
has been a recurring phenomenon in the history of God's relation to man
although completed in the form of the Qur'an. Thus folk theology asserts
that principles of reality based upon Islamic principles may be articulated by
direct reflections on nature, man, and God. The principles of this reality
may be also revealed through the experience of mystics and in poetry, music,
stories, and proverbs. According to some, the reality of the world according
to Islamic principles and the existence of the prophet were known before the
historic birth of Mohammad, although lost in the process of history. Hence
direct reflection on these ultimate principles of reality, and the variety of
ways in which God's majesty impresses itself on man, can reveal the true.
principles of Islam according to which the world is ordered. The Qur'an and
the shari'ah are revered within this paradigm (Lings 1961 and el-Zein 1974
and 1977). Institutional theology of the ulamas, however, emphasises the
formalism by which meaning has to be strictly bounded by one or the other
acceptable traditions of exegesis of the Qur'an, which alone is capable of
revealing the Islamic order. It is not the task of the sociologist or the
historian to displace either view, for it is in their mutual dialogue that the
answer to the question of what constitutes Islam may be found.

The second direction in which folk theologies proceed is in the elaboration
of narrative traditions through which Islamic principles have been preserved
and communicated. A whole genre of oral and written literature has grown
round such narratives. To take an example, Mohammad's instructions to a
Bedouin about how to perform salât—if he had a Qur'an he should recite it,
otherwise he should praise and magnify God—is used as an illustrative
analogy to establish that Islamic principles lay greater emphasis on piety and
devotion than formal requirements of a ritual. The problem that this kind of
literature would pose to Robinson is that it introduces some uncertainty as
to the distinctive features of a good Muslim. We may, however, console
ourselves by recalling that even God waits till judgement day to make such a
pronouncement.

Lastly, a word on Robinson's sociology of knowledge. He says that
Ahmad, Mujeeb, Faruqi and Mushirul Hasan can easily be placed in that
tradition of scholarship which emphasises that Indian Muslims have their
roots deep in Indian society, that they are natural inhabitants of India. As a
criticism, this makes no sense since very good studies of Islam have come
from scholars who had their roots deep in different kinds of societies. So,
what Robinson is implicitly accusing these scholars of is that their view of
Islam deliberately emphasises syncretism, and hesitates to condemn it, so
that they can establish that 'there is no reason why they (Indian Muslims)
cannot be good and loyal citizens of the Republic of India' (ibid.: 197).
I feel very hesitant to engage in an argument like this in which an insinuation is made that some of our colleagues are manipulating ideas to serve extra-academic interests. But if theories are to be explained by interests, then I am compelled to ask about the interests that Robinson is supporting when he asserts that where ‘some form of holy law has come to be applied by the modern state, with all its great coercive force and power of social penetration (emphasis added), we may be sure that large groups of Muslims have probably come closer to the pattern of perfection than ever before’ (ibid.: 194). I wonder if this support given to repressive regimes, to the use of torture, war, and punishment, by scholars who themselves enjoy all the privileges of democratic and liberal systems, should be integrated as an important element into Robinson’s sociology of knowledge.

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