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Author(s): TALAL ASAD

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The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam

TALAL ASAD

For three decades, Talal Asad's work on the question of religion, and on the entanglements of this question with the sensibilities of modern life, has steadily overturned dominant paradigms in anthropology. Critiquing the textualization of social life, his work has redirected analysis away from the interpretation of behaviors and toward inquiry into the relation of practices to what he has termed a "discursive tradition." Asad introduced this concept in making an intervention in the anthropology of Islam, yet it has also become important across a number of fields (anthropology, religious studies, postcolonial studies, critical theory) concerned with ethics and religion in modernity. It was first elaborated in the paper below, written in 1986 for the Occasional Paper Series sponsored by the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University. Despite the essay's significance, it has not circulated as widely as Asad's other writings. Qui Parle is reprinting it in order to make available the particular arguments that developed this broadly influential concept.

I

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.¹

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 this question in a survey entitled "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam."² 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 unconscious logic. This curious slippage from an anthropological contextualism into a 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 Gilsean, who, like El-Zein, emphasizes in his recent book *Recognizing Islam* that no other form of Islam may be excluded from the anthropologist's interest on the grounds that it is not the true Islam.³ 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 anthropol-

ogists—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 attempts 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.⁴ 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 overall picture presented by Gellner are to be found also in other writings—by anthropologists, Orientalists, political scientists, and journalists. 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 Gulick's or Eickelman's—devote their

chapter on “Religion” entirely to Islam.⁵ Although Christianity and Judaism are also indigenous to the region, it is only Muslim belief and practice that Western anthropologists appear to be interested in.⁶ In effect, for most Western anthropologists, 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 the Middle East as the true locus of Islam does not come primarily from the old objection to religion being represented as the essence of a history and a civilization (an objection which even some Orientalists like Becker advanced long ago).⁷ My concern as an anthropologist is over the way this particular contrast effects 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 recommendation to give unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s. A faith which begins, and for some time remains, without political power, cannot accommodate itself to a political order which is not, or is not yet, under its control. . . . Christianity, which initially flourished among the politically disinherited, 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. (*MS*, 1–2)

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 colonial missionaries, 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 Christianity. 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.⁸ This is one of the very few anthropological studies of contemporary Islam that employs 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 few years has been concerned with detailed anthropological analyses of monastic ritual, the sacrament of confession and the medieval Inquisition in twelfth-century Western Europe, institutions that stand in contrast to the very different connections between power and religion in the medieval Middle East.⁹ 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 here is not the familiar and valid one that Muslim 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 postclassical periods displayed no curiosity about

Christianity, and that in this 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.¹⁰ 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. “Marked 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.”¹¹ Perhaps that was so, but our question is best approached by turning it around and asking not why Islam was uncurious about Europe but why Roman Christians were interested in the beliefs and practices of Others. The answer has less to do with cultural motives allegedly produced by the intrinsic qualities of a world-view or by the collective experience of military encounters, and more with structures of disciplinary practices that called for different kinds of systemic knowledge. After all, Christian communities living among Muslims in the Middle East were not noted for their scholarly curiosity about Europe either, and Muslim travelers often visited and wrote about African and Asian societies. It does not make good sense to think in terms of the contrasting attitudes of Islam and Christianity, in which a disembodied “indifference” faces a disembodied “desire to learn about the Other.” One ought instead to be looking for the institutional conditions for the production of various social knowledges. What was regarded as worth recording about “other” beliefs and customs? By whom was it recorded? In which social project were the records used? Thus, it is no mere coincidence that the most impressive catalogues of pagan belief and practice in early medieval Christendom are those contained in the Penitentials (handbooks for administering sacramental confession to recently converted Christians) or that the suc-

cessive manuals for inquisitors in the later European Middle Ages describe with increasing precision and comprehensiveness the doctrines and rites of heretics. There is nothing in Muslim societies to parallel these compilations of systematic knowledge about “internal” unbelievers simply because the disciplines that required and sustained such information are not to be found in Islam. In other words, forms of interest in the production of knowledge are intrinsic to various structures of power, and they differ not according to the essential character of Islam or Christianity, but according to historically changing systems of discipline.

Thus, beyond my misgivings about the plausibility of historical contrasts in terms of cultural motives—such as “potential for political modesty” on the one hand, and “theocratic potential” on the other—lies another concern, namely that there may well be important differences which the anthropologist studying other societies ought to explore, and which may too easily be obscured by the search for superficial or spurious differences. The problem with the kind of contrasts of Islam with Christianity drawn by Gellner is not that the relations between religion and political power are the same in the two. Rather, the very terms employed are misleading, and we need to find concepts that are more appropriate for describing differences.

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 reversed. This view is open to criticism both because it disregards the detailed workings of disciplinary power in Christian history and because it is theoretically most inadequate. 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 must 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 non-orthodox 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 what they are, formed in different ways in different conditions. In fact, the religion of the countryside 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 country folk is highly variable. “Orthodoxy” is therefore, for such anthropologists, merely one (albeit invariable) form of Islam among many, distinguished by its preoccupation with the niceties 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 dissident, 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 supplant an incumbent ruler. The two cat-

egories of Islam fit nicely into the two kinds of social and political structure: *shari'a* law in the cities, variable custom among the tribes; *'ulama* in the former, saints in 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 sacred texts (and so 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 the classical sociologies of religion, Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, and 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 strong rural appeal. One corner-stone of the official religion is saintship. The deviant 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 in recognized local consent.¹²

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. Hammoudi, Cornell).¹³ This kind of criticism is important, but it 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 the social structure should focus not on typical actors but on the changing patterns of institutional relations 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 that 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 protagonists engaged in a dramatic struggle. Segmentary tribes confront centralized states. Armed nomads "lust 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 declining dynasty. Demoralized 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 discourses 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 protagonists 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-an-immobile-structure," for example, he writes that "Islam provided a common language and thus a certain kind of smoothness for a process which, in a more mute and brutalistic

form, had been taking place anyway.” In other words, if one removes the common language of Islam, nothing of any significance 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 motivates 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 conditions 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 preoccupation 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 portrayed as essentially theatrical. Yet for Geertz, as for Gellner, the schematization of Islam as a drama of religiosity expressing power is obtained by omitting indigenous discourses, and by turning all Islamic behavior into *readable gesture*.

V

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 misconstruing historical structures.

As an 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 struc-

tures 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 important 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 socio-economic 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.¹⁴

The assumption that pastoral nomads in the Muslim Middle East have a typical political and economic structure is misleading.¹⁵ 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 herding arrangements, rights 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 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 somehow typical for 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 only that 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 of 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 production and exchange, one can tell a rather different story. Cultivators, male and female, produce crops (just as pastoralists of both sexes raise animals) that they sell or yield up in rent and taxes. Peasants, even in the historical Middle East, *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 transcontinental trade.¹⁶ 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 economy and social 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 in 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."*¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ 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 ur-

ban 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 one rejects 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 that, 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 askable and 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 different conceptions 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" (MS, 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.¹⁹

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 a religious condition which is also a forgetting" (MS, 48).²⁰ 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" (MS, 42).²¹ The echoes from Weber's *Protestant Ethic* in this passage are not acci-

dental, for its authority is invoked more than once. In this account, the “bourgeois Muslim” is accorded a moral—or, better, an esthetic—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 that 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 that seek to represent different things, and that 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 anthropology 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 importantly, 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” (*MS*, 47) and partly because of “The totalism of both ideologies [which] precludes institutionalized politics” (*MS*, 48).²²

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.²³ A moment's reflection will show that it is not the literal scope of the *shari'a* that 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.²⁴

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."²⁵ 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 Muslim 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. Most anthropologists 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 tribal Islam and that of universal Islam.²⁶ 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?²⁷ A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a *past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance 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 discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the *Islamic* past and future, 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.

My point is not, 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,²⁸ that it is an old cloak for new aspirations and borrowed styles of behavior.²⁹ The claim that contemporary ideas and social arrangements are really ancient when they are not is 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 about tradition is simply that all instituted practice’s 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, that it is *orthopraxy* and not *orthodoxy*, ritual and not doctrine, that matters in Islam.³⁰ It is misleading because such a contention ignores the centrality of the notion of “the correct model” to which an instituted practice—including 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 *’alim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent.³¹ (It may well 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.)³²

Orthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic traditions. But the sense in which I use this term must be distinguished from the sense given it by most Orientalists and anthropologists. Anthropologists like El-Zein, who wish to deny any special significance to orthodoxy, and those like Gellner, who see it as a specific set of doctrines “at the heart of Islam,” both are missing something vital: that orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power to truth. 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, et cetera), 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 Abdallah Laroui calls “tradition as structure” and distinguishes from “tradition as ideology” [*CI*, 33]) 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,” an opposition which was elaborated by the conservative theorists who followed him, and introduced into sociology by Weber.³³

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.³⁴ 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 homogenous, that heterogeneity in Muslim practices is not necessarily an indication of the absence of an Islamic tradition. The variety of traditional Muslim practices in different times, places, and populations indicate 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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 to which the traditions are related 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸

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 to which they aspire—or to whose survival they are quite indifferent. Declarations of moral neutrality, here as always, are no guarantee of political innocence.

Notes

1. See, for example, Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
2. Abdul Hamid El-Zein, "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 227–54.
3. Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam* (London: Croom Helm, 1982). Hereafter cited as *RI*.
4. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Hereafter cited as *MS*.
5. John Gulick, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Perspective* (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear, 1976); Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976).
6. There are a few exceptions, such as Suad Joseph and Barbara Pillsbury, eds., *Muslim-Christian Conflicts* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978).
7. See Josef van Ess, "From Wellhausen to Becker: The Emergence of Kulturgeschichte in Islamic Studies," in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, ed. Malcolm H. Kerr (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1980).

8. Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
9. Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983): 237–59; Talal Asad, "Notes on Body Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual," *Economy and Society* 12, no. 3 (1983): 287–327; Talal Asad, "Medieval Heresy: An Anthropological View," *Social History* 11, no. 2 (1986): 354–62; Talal Asad, "On Ritual and Discipline in Medieval Christian Monasticism," *Economy and Society*, 16, no. 2 (1987): 159–203.
10. For example: Gustave von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 40.
11. Bernard Lewis, "The Muslim Discovery of Europe," in *Islam in History*, ed. Bernard Lewis (New York: Library Press, 1962), 40.
12. Bryan Turner, *Weber and Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 70.
13. Abdallah Hammoudi, "Segmentarity, Social Stratification, Political Power and Sainthood: Reflections on Gellner's Theses," *Economy and Society* 9, no. 3 (1980): 279–303; Vincent J. Cornell, "The Logic of Analogy and the Role of the Sufi Shaykh in Post-Marinid Morocco," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 1 (1983): 67–93.
14. Bryan Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), 52.
15. Talal Asad, *The Kababish Arabs: Power, Authority and Consent in a Nomadic Tribe* (London: Hurst, 1970); Talal Asad, "The Beduin as a Military Force," in *The Desert and the Sown*, ed. Cynthia Nelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Talal Asad, "Equality in Nomadic Systems?" in *Pastoral and Production and Society*, ed. Equipe Écologie et Anthropologie des Sociétés Pastorales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
16. Andrew M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
17. The changing networks of intercontinental trade that linked *Dar ul-Islam* to Europe, Africa, and Asia differentially affected and were affected by patterns of production and consumption within it (see Maurice Lombard, *L'Islam dans sa première grandeur: VIII–XIe siècles* [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 Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977], especially 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. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 11.
19. 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 be egalitarian; it *needs* to be joyous and festival-worthy, not puritanical and scholarly; it *requires* hierarchy and incarnation in persons, not in scripts” (MS, 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” (MS, 52; emphasis in original).
20. Such phrases might be more plausible (but not therefore entirely valid—see, e.g., Janet Abu-Lughod, “Varieties of Urban Experience,” in *Middle Eastern Cities: A Symposium on Ancient, Islamic, and Contemporary Middle Eastern Urbanism*, ed. Ira M. Lapidus [Berkeley: University of California 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 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 *eagerness of the migrant-rustics to acquire respectability*” (MS, 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.
21. Most Muslims for most of their history, as Gellner himself acknowledges, cannot be described as scripturalist puritans, yet “Islam,” he claims, expresses a scripturalist, puritan 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 bourgeoisie.” 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 indeed in what sense they are “better” puritans than, say, 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 Hurgronje’s *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* [Leiden: Brill, 1931]), will know that the rites of passage are more elaborate among the “well-heeled urban bourgeoisie” than among the lower urban social strata. “Scripturalism” based on literacy? But the literacy of merchants is very different from the literacy of professional “men of religion” (see Brian V. Street’s excellent book, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984]). Besides, the traditions of Qur’anic exegesis developed by Muslim “men of religion” are far richer and more diverse than the blanket term “scripturalist” suggests.

22. In reproducing 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 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 232–34. Since the idea of 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.
23. 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 Democratic Republic of Yemen are exceptions that prove the rule. (See also Alexandre A. Bennigsen and S. E. Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979] for an account of protracted resistances against Russian imperial power.) Marxist ideology has been associated with *some* Westernized intellectuals and *some* authoritarian states, but *never* with *’ulama* or the well-heeled urban bourgeoisie, who are sup-

posed by Gellner to be the historical carriers of scripturalist, puritan Islam. It is his mistaken attempt to connect this latter kind of Islam with “Marxism,” “Socialism,” or “Social radicalism” (terms used indiscriminately) that leads him to make the implausible argument that “scripturalist rigorism or fundamentalism” is admirably suited to bringing about modernization in the Muslim world.

24. As a succinct evocation of the powers of the modern state, the following memorable passage from Robert Musil’s great novel has scarcely been bettered: “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 any 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 existence, just as the common man denies the existence of the air, insisting that it is mere emptiness.” *The Man without Qualities*, vol. 1 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), 182.
25. Nikki Keddie, *Scholars, Saints and Sufis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 13.
26. Dale F. Eickelman, “The Study of Islam in Local Contexts,” *Contributions to Asian Studies* 17 (1984): 1–16.
27. In outlining the concept of tradition, I am indebted to the insightful writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, in particular his brilliant book *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981).
28. Thus Gilsean: “Tradition, therefore, is put together in all manner of different ways in contemporary conditions of crisis; it is a term that is in fact highly variable and shifting in content. It changes, though all who use it do so to mark out truths and principles as essentially unchanging. In the name of tradition many traditions are born and come into opposition with others. It becomes a language, a weapon against internal and external enemies, a refuge, an evasion, or part of the entitlement to domination and authority over others” (*RI*, 15).
29. Or as Abdallah Laroui puts it in *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 35, hereafter cited as *CI*: “one might say that tradition exists only when innovation is accepted under the cloak of fidelity to the past.”
30. For example, see Eickelman, *Middle East*, chapter 9. In a short paper

written many years ago, "Politics and Religion in Islamic Reform" (*Review of Middle East Studies*, no. 2, London: Ithaca Press, 1976) I emphasized that orthodoxy is always the product of a network of power.

31. 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 *malaka*) is especially relevant to an understanding of what I have called Islamic traditions. In a recent essay, "Knowledge, Virtue and Action: The Classical Muslim Conception of *Adab* and the Nature of Religious Fulfillment in Islam," Ira Lapidus has included a brief but useful account of Ibn Khaldun's concept of *malaka* (in Barbara D. Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* [Berkeley: University of California, 1984], 52–56).
32. Cf. "Doctrine" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
33. See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," in *Paradigms and Revolutions*, ed. Gary Gutting (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1980), 64–65.
34. See John Dixon and Leslie Stratta, "Argument and the Teaching of English: A Critical Analysis," in *Writers Writing*, ed. A. Wilkinson (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1986).
35. Thus, in an essay entitled "Late Antiquity and Islam: Parallels and Contrasts" (in B. D. Metcalf, *Moral Conduct and Authority*), 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 down 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" (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 Raymond 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 ou

de militants, on se partage entre adeptes d'une authenticité sans avenir et adeptes d'une modernisme sans racines. Le français traduit mal, en l'espèce, ce qui en arabe vient beaucoup mieux: ançâr al-maçîr bilâ açîl wa ançar al-açîl bilâ maçîr." *L'Islam: La philosophie et les sciences* (Paris: Les Presses de l'Unesco, 1981), 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" that has accompanied the disruption of the "stable, indeed static, social world" of traditional Muslim society (cf. Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973], 196, 192). I have argued that that world was never stable and static, and hold that the concept of a complex and evolving Islamic tradition does not presuppose a simple unity of values.