Critical Categories in the Study of Religion

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From Ronald Lukens-Bull's "Between Text and Practice: Considerations in the Anthropological Study of Islam"

3. Diversity of Tradition

Part of the answer to the anthropologist's question "What is Islam?" is conditioned by what she may or may not include in her definition of Islam. For instance, are local spirit beliefs, saint's shrines, and festivals Islamic? To deal with these issues more effectively it is necessary to take a step back from Islam. The problems encountered by anthropologists studying Islamic societies are also faced by anthropologists studying other monotheistic societies. John Bowen argues that the main impediment to the anthropological study of monotheisms is that these religions do not fit well in the normal ethnographic model. The texts and rituals common to a monotheism transcend any particular locale. These texts and rituals take the believer, and should take the ethnographer, outside the village to a "worldwide confessional community" (Bowen 1993a, 185). He argues that these rituals and texts, "encode a sameness, a conformity, a remove from cultural specificity and social structure" (1993a, 185). These are family resemblances among all expressions of a single world religion. However, within this range of family resemblance, there is also a great deal of diversity. I will now turn to an exploration of the various theoretical means of dealing with this diversity.

Great and Little Traditions

An influential model for anthropological studies of world religions was proposed by Robert Redfield. He suggested that all world religions, and some local religions (i.e. Mayan religion) could be divided into a "great tradition" and "little tradition" (1956). The great tradition, the orthodox form of the cultural/religious center, is that of the urban elite. It is the religion of the reflective few and is cultivated in schools and temples and is "consciously cultivated and handed down" (1956, 70). Great traditions have also been called "textual traditions," "orthodoxy," "philosophical religions," "high traditions," and "universal traditions." The little tradition is the heterodox form of the cultural/religious periphery. The little tradition incorporates many elements of local tradition and practice. The little tradition is the religion as it is practiced in daily life by ordinary people (in Redfield's assessment, the largely unreflective many). The little tradition is taken for granted and is not subject to a great deal of scrutiny, refinement, or improvement (1956, 70). Little traditions are also referred to by the terms "local tradition," "low tradition," and "popular religion."

The great-and-little-traditions model was part of Redfield's view of peasant societies as half-societies with half-cultures. Redfield taught us that peasant communities could not be studied as if they were isolated from any outside influence; they are, almost by definition, part of a wider civilization which draws its subsistence from the fruits of their labor (1956, 68–69). He suggests that the relationship between the peasant sector and other sectors (trade, nobility/administration, religious elite) is reflected in the shape of their religious beliefs.

The great-and-little-traditions dichotomy arose out of the attempt to understand the social organization of tradition. Richard Antoun states that "the social organization of tradition" is an absolutely necessary process in all complex societies. It is the process by which various religious hierarchies are established between the folk and the elite via cultural brokers which serve as intermediaries between the folk and the elite (Antoun 1989, 31). These hierarchies shape the form that religious practices take by imposing communicative constraints (Hefner 1987, 74). Hence, it is necessary to know the specific relationships between adherents of great and little traditions in each local setting. Redfield concurs that while anthropology may be primarily interested in the local practice of religion, it cannot ignore the interaction between these two aspects of tradition (1956, 86, 98).

The question to be explored is *how* the two aspects are interconnected. Implicit is the notion that in order for any great tradition to spread and be commonly practiced it must have mass appeal, that is to say, it must become a little tradition. On the other hand, the communication between great and little traditions is not just one way. McKim Marriott has suggested that universalization and parochialization are two ways in which the little and great traditions interact. Universalization is the process by which a local tradition is transformed into a great tradition or part of a great tradition. In Hinduism, Marriott suggests, the goddess Laksmi of Hindu orthodoxy is derived from local village goddesses (as cited in Redfield 1956, 94–96). As a further example, the Old Testament ethics rose from the little tradition of a tribal people. Parochialization is the process by which some element of the great tradition is learned and then shaped to become part of local religious practice (Redfield 1956, 96). Parochialization, or contextualization, involves the "translation" of symbols by means of drawing out certain aspects of the world religion and expressing it in terms meaningful to the local culture.

Redfield affirms that the two traditions are interdependent by stating, "Great and little tradition can be thought of as two currents of thought and action, distinguishable, yet ever flowing into and out of each other" (1956, 72). The influences on the little tradition may have never been present in a particular village, and may have originated far away in both space and time, and yet they shape the little tradition (1956, 70).

The very fact that Islam started in Arabia and then spread around the world suggests the process of universalization. In contemporary Islam, certain nearly universal practices, such as the *jilbab* (a women's garment covering the head and extending to the wrists and ankles, but not veiling the face) have their origins in Arab cultural practices and not in the teachings of Muhammad. However, the *jilbab*, the veil, and other *shari'a*-based practices become symbols of orthodox Islam and, in some settings, ethnic markers (Ewing 1988, 2).

Redfield suggests that the relationship between the great and the little tradition can be marked by deprecation or adjustment. In the case of the deprecation, the religious elite may view the religion of the common folk as superstition. In the case of adjustment, the teachers of the tradition may recognize popular tradition as the religion of those

who do not fully understand the truths of the faith; hence they tolerate practices that would otherwise be considered heretical (Redfield 1956, 84). In this instance, Redfield states, the teachers interpret doctrine in such a way as to provide a sanction for local beliefs and practice within orthodoxy (Redfield 1956, 84).

Critique of "Great and Little Traditions"

Asad suggests that one problem that must be solved by an anthropology of Islam is the conceptual organization of the diversity in Islam (1986, 5). The great/little tradition division was one way to solve the problem of diversity. However, the division has been widely criticized. Bowen states that the dichotomy was attractive for anthropologists because it allowed them to study what they were used to studying, villages, and left to Orientalists the problem of understanding the texts (1993a, 185). Bowen states that anthropologists and other scholars concerned with local forms of culture looked for the rites, myths, or ideas that made the group they were studying distinctive rather than those they shared with other Muslims (1993b, 4). Dale Eickelman suggests that when scholars mention great and little traditions they tend merely to juxtapose them and not explore their complex interrelationships (1982, 2). The distinction between great and little tradition also leads to a division of labor between those who are interested in local forms of a religious tradition and those who are interested in religious texts (Bowen 1993b, 4). This, however, leads to an overly narrow view of the tradition. In Islam, the universal aspects of tradition are sometimes thought of as the core of Islam. This has "lent a normative and cultural priority to the Middle East vis-à-vis the rest of the Muslim world" (Bowen 1993b, 6).

A further problem with the model, according to Talal Asad, is that it leads anthropologists to assert that "neither form of Islam has a claim to being regarded as 'more real' than the other" (Asad 1986, 6). Asad seems to take a theological position about the "corrupted" nature of local Islam, and seems to suggest that the great tradition is indeed more real than the little tradition.

Abdul Hamid el-Zein criticizes academicians who, like Asad, make theological assertions. He argues "both theology and anthropology claim a higher degree of reflection than folk expressions of Islam" (1977, 243). Therefore, both regard local Islam as "less ordered, less objective, and somehow less complete versions of the religious experience" (1977, 243). Anthropologists often regard local variants of Islam as a diluted form corrupted by magic and superstition. El-Zein argues that this view of local "islams" implies that a "pure and well-defined essence of Islam" exists, even if it cannot be readily found (el-Zein 1977, 243). Theologians construct what Gellner (1981, 5) sees as a traditional division between folk Islam and scholarly Islam (el-Zein 1977, 241). Further, theologians view Islam as an "isolable and bounded domain of meaningful phenomena" which by its very nature is distinct from other cultural forms (1977, 241).

El-Zein argues that the dichotomy of folk Islam (little tradition) versus elite Islam (great tradition) is infertile and fruitless. This dichotomy is part of an Islamic elite's attempt to dominate the discourse about what constitutes real religion (el-Zein 1977, 252). He argues that various theological and anthropological interpretations of the meaning of Islam are dependent upon assumptions which define and limit what can be properly considered "religious" and "Islamic." These assumptions distinguish a "folk from an elite, and a real from a false Islam" (el-Zein 1977, 249). El-Zein suggests that it is ironic that anthropology studies folk Islam while using the principles of elite Islam (el-Zein 1977, 246).

Antoun suggests that el-Zein's criticisms overlook the fact that Redfield dealt with a two-way flow of cultural materials. He states,

> Redfield assumed that great traditions were built up out of little ones and Marriott and Singer, among others, have documented instances of such a process in the study of Hindu society and culture in India (1989, 43).

Antoun argues that the dichotomization of tradition is not inherently infertile. However, what is infertile and even dangerous is the assignment, by the anthropologist, of the superiority of the great tradition over the little tradition (Antoun 1989, 43). Asad is wrong in wanting anthropologists to declare which form of Islam is "more real." I contend that the ultimate "truth" of a theological claim is beyond the jurisdiction of anthropology.

Ignaz Goldziher suggested as early as 1910 that it was a mistake to see Islam as a monolithic whole (1981 [1910], 4). Goldziher demonstrated the dynamics of diversity evident in Islam from early in its history to the time of his writing (ca. 1910). The diversity in Islam is far more than the split between Shi'i and Sunni. The world-wide Islamic community, even within each major section, is typified by cultural diversity (Davies 1988, 63). Neither great nor little traditions are unified wholes. Even the little tradition of a single village is not unified (Antoun 1989, 39). There is individual interpretation in theology and practice involved at both levels.

4. Diversity and Discourse

If, as much contemporary scholarship suggests, we cannot use the distinction between great and little traditions, we must find some other way to deal with the diversity in Islam. Talal Asad suggests that there are three common anthropological solutions to this problem. The first suggests that there is "no such theoretical object as Islam" and therefore there is no need to deal with the diversity between Muslim societies. The second uses Islam as a label for a "heterogeneous collection of items, each of which has been designated Islamic by informants." The third holds that Islam is a "distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life" (1986, 1). In about a paragraph each, Asad hastily disposes of the first two approaches. He examines at

length the third approach but concludes that it is not acceptable. He offers the notion of Islam as a discursive tradition as an alternative approach. I will explore all three approaches, the first two at greater length than Asad himself, concluding that there is some value in the first two approaches which Asad overlooked. Also, there are some problems with the third approach which Asad overlooked.

According to Asad, the approach that suggests there is no such theoretical object as Islam is typified by Abdul Hamid el-Zein's article "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam" (1977). This approach, according to Asad, holds that there "are diverse forms of Islam, each equally real" (1986, 2). What el-Zein contributed to the scholarly discourse about Islam was an alternative to essentialist approaches to Islam. El-Zein suggested that the term *Islam* be replaced by *islams* (1977, 227–54). Dale Eickelman states that this approach emphasizes the multiplicity of Islamic expressions and does not privilege one expression over another (1987, 19). Embedded in el-Zein's article is a rebuttal to Asad's criticism. El-Zein criticizes any anthropological work which takes a theological, or quasi-theological, position in regard to local traditions. Asad's repeated assertion that anthropology must be able to determine which forms of Islam are most real falls into this category of theologically inclined anthropology.

Ironically, a version of the "no such thing as Islam" approach is seen in Middle East studies, where some anthropologists assume Islam to be non-problematic and static; hence they have no need to deal with the diversity in Islam. The assumption is that if a scholar has a basic understanding of Islam, there is no need to explore the local Islam. Hence, these scholars tend to discuss all culture as local. For example, Abu-Lughod's book *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986) has few references to Islam and does not deal with Islam in any significant way. Elsewhere, Abu-Lughod states that it is mistaken to see all practices and discourses in the Arab world as related to an Islamic tradition (1989, 294). While she is correct, an over-zealous application of this position would suggest that it is possible to study an Islamic society without considering the nature of Islam within that local context. Asad accuses Michael Gilsenan of the shortcomings of the second approach by stating,

> The idea [Gilsenan] adopts from other anthropologists—that Islam is simply what Muslim 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 (1986, 2).

Asad sells short Gilsenan's work (1982). Far from seeing Islam as whatever Muslims in an area say is Islam, Gilsenan explores the complexities of Islam. He looks at how certain central features (*baraka*, *'ulama'*, etc.) vary throughout the Arab world. Gilsenan states,

> What Islam means for Muslims in the modern world is now an issue for debate and action in the context of the politics of nation states, the struggle for energy supplies, superpower rivalry, and dependency. What is the *umma*, the Islamic

> community, and how and where is *ijma*, or consensus to be formed? What is Islamic government and in what forms and institutions must it be embodied? (1982, 14–15).

Gilsenan sees the definition of social elements as Islamic or non-Islamic as part of a political process. He describes an overall process whereby,

> certain classes and groups that are politically and economically dominant in society legitimize a form of religion that increasingly relates to a specifically class view of how Islam is to be defined, practiced, studied, taught, and authorized. This will be the "real" and legitimate Islam ... (1982, 211).

Abu-Lughod defends Gilsenan's work because of his view of the social forces in Islam and because of his "fundamental respect for the ordinary people through whom he comes to recognize Islam ..." (1989, 295).

Asad states that Ernest Gellner's *Muslim Society* (1981) is the most ambitious attempt to describe Islam as "distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life" (1986, 1). Gellner opens his book by saying,

> Islam is the blueprint of a social order. It holds that a set of rules exists, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society (1981, 1).

Gellner continues to state that while Judaism and Christianity are also social blueprints, they are less so than Islam. He attributes this to the fact that Islam, unlike Christianity and Judaism, quickly became the religion of the political elite (1981, 2). However, even since Christianity became accepted by the Roman Emperors politics became and continues to be intimately related with Christianity. One need look no further than Liberation Theology in Latin America, or the Moral Majority in the United States to see contemporary examples of such a connection (Asad 1986, 3).

Many anthropological studies of Islam echo Gellner's sociological focus. In a way, the ideological aspects of Islam are assumed to be so similar to Christianity that it is thought that they have little impact on life in a Muslim society. Gellner bases his model on the interactions between towns and tribal peoples in Arab Middle East-North Africa (Asad 1986, 5). This clearly overlooks the impact of Islam in Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and other non-Arab Islamic areas. One consequence of such an approach is to assert that those who do not follow the cultural practices of Arabs are somehow not good Muslims. This is the position of some contemporary Muslim reformists; again anthropology takes a theological position.

Gellner uses David Hume's notions of "flux and reflux" of polytheism and monotheism to argue that a natural part of the human experience is the cyclical movement from polytheism to monotheism and back again. None of this movement, both to and away from monotheism, is based on rational motivation. Gellner argues that a return to polytheism is marked by God sharing the stage with other important figures. Hence, paganism has its heroes, Catholicism its saints, and Islam its dervishes (Gellner

1981, 9–11). He avers that popular Islam, with its saints, tombs, and mystics, is polytheism, an argument with which many fundamentalist Muslims would be quick to agree.

Although Asad sees too little value in approaches to Islam other than his own, his definition of Islam as discursive tradition is useful. The approaches which Asad hastily rejects contribute two important reminders. The first suggests that it is a mistake to study an Islamic study with a monolithic, essentialist conception of Islam; there may be as many forms of Islam as there are Muslims. The second suggests that it is crucial that we accept the self-identification of Muslims. If someone calls himself a Muslim and identifies certain practices as Islamic, as scholars, we must begin by accepting that statement as true and then examine how these practices differ from those of other Muslims. The question to be explored is why there are differences between various groups which identify themselves as Muslims. This is where Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition is most useful. As a discursive tradition, Islam is constantly being reshaped to fit with an ever-changing world.

Asad asserts that anthropologists of Islam, most notably Geertz and Gellner, have ignored the role of indigenous discourses in the tradition (1986, 8, 9). Asad counters Eickelman's suggestion that there is a need for a middle ground between Islam's great and little traditions (1982) by suggesting that instead of the right level of analysis, an anthropology of Islam needs the right concepts. He suggests that "a discursive tradition" is such a concept (1986, 14). It is in discourse, and not in social structure, or political style, that one finds the unifying principles of Islam (Asad 1986, 11). The discursive nature of Islam means that everywhere Islam is concerned with deciding what is allowable (*halal*) and what is not (*haram*) (Davies 1988, 62). Asad states that anthropological studies of Islam should start from the same assumption Muslims do, that Islam is a discursive tradition that "includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*" (1986, 14).

Asad defines a discursive tradition as a discourse which seeks to instruct practitioners about the correct form and purpose of a given practice. Further, it seeks conceptually to link a past and a future through a present. However, Asad asserts, not all that Muslims say and do is included in an Islamic discursive tradition (Asad 1986, 14–15).

So far the discussion about discourse has skirted around the central question of the content and intent of Islamic discourse. Roff states that Islamic discourse often concerns a dialectic between the ideal and the actual (1988, 26). It is often about how to live as Muslims in a less than ideal world. This often includes questions about the place of *shari'a* and how to balance indigenous practices with it. These are questions about what is permissible and what is not, which are central to much of Islamic discourse.

Islam is far from unique as a discursive tradition. The world's other two major monotheisms (Christianity and Judaism) are also discursive traditions (Bowen 1993b). In fact, all world religions and major ideologies (i.e. Marxism) could be considered discursive traditions. However, in its concern with determining the forbidden (*haram*)

and the permissible (*halal*), and in allowing whatever is not forbidden as permissible Islam seems unique.

Asad criticizes other anthropologists for not looking at indigenous discourses; on the other hand, however, his depiction of Islamic discourse focuses too much on the Qur'an and *hadith*. Asad rejects Gilsenan's view of the discursive (or debated) nature of Islam as being too far removed from the Qur'an and *hadith*. While these texts certainly play a role in Islamic discourses (both local and inter-local), other texts (those of various Islamic thinkers, both contemporary and past), local concerns, and local practices also play into this discourse.

Asad provides a necessary corrective to the non-literate approach anthropologists tend to take toward religion. Abu-Lughod states that anthropologists have tended toward non-literacy in their approach to religion, much like most of the people they have studied. By this she means that anthropologists have tended not to have access to the archives and texts which would illuminate the behavior they are seeing. While Abu-Lughod salutes this "healthy bias toward looking for religion in what people say and do," she recognizes the need for anthropologists to explore texts (1989, 297). Indeed, even very prominent ethnographers have made analytical errors because of a lack of knowledge of Islamic texts (e.g. Geertz 1960; 1968).

Most discussions about Islamic texts and their relationship to local *islams* seems to suggest a unified position of the texts vis-à-vis popular practice. However, as Messick points out, Islamic texts are polyvocal (1988, 637). There are contradictory *hadith*, and lesser texts are much more prone to sharp disagreement on a range of theological and legal questions. Islamic discourse is not just between texts and practice but also between different practices.

Bowen states that in Islamic discourse there is a tension between the local situation and the universal aspects of Islam that is central in the lives of many Muslims (1993b, 7). He states that a new generation of scholars has begun to pay attention to this tension. The point of departure for these scholars has been "the social life of religious discourse: how written text and oral traditions are produced, read, and reread" (Bowen 1993b, 7). Bowen states that looking at Islam in terms of distinct local "*islams*" runs the risk of obscuring "both the historic connections across different Muslim societies and many Muslims' strong sense of an external, normative reference point for their ideas and practices" (1993b, 7). Whereas Asad wishes to center the discourse around the Qur'an and *hadith*, Bowen, and others, suggest that both other religious texts and other "foundations of Islamic knowledge" such as oral traditions and systems of cosmological speculation become part of the discourse (1993b, 10; Abu-Lughod 1989, 297).

If we are to approach Islam as a discursive tradition we must take the self-identification of Muslims seriously. Although Roff wishes to take seriously what Muslims say, he defines "Muslim" narrowly as one who accepts the *shari'a* (Islamic law) (1987b, 31). Although Roff claims to reject essentialist views of Islam (1987a, 1), he privileges *shari'a* and hence forwards an essentialist view which could easily

ignore the discourse of those who are Muslims but do not necessarily follow *shari'a*. In both Persia and Java, there are stories about a Sufi saint[2] who proclaimed that the *shari'a* was only for common people who need the guidance to know right and wrong but could be ignored by advanced mystics. The saint was condemned not for the belief, but for discussing it publicly and hence potentially confusing people (Woodward 1989, 192).

Mark Woodward's definitions of the components of Islamic discourse shed light on the nature of the discourse. The universalist Islam with which local islams interact is far more than the Qur'an and *hadith*. It includes rituals such as the *hajj*, the *salat*, *'id al-adha*, *'id al-fitr*, and the fast of Ramadan among others. However, local islams do not enter into discourse with the entire universalist corpus of Islam. Received Islam is what Woodward calls that portion of universalist Islam present in specific local contexts. Finally, local islams are those rituals and texts, both oral and written, that are not known outside of a specific local context. These local rituals and texts arise from the interaction of local culture and received Islam (Woodward 1988, 87–88). Further, local islams can interact with each other (Woodward 1988, 65).

Richard Antoun suggests five perspectives which are useful for understanding the discursive nature of traditions. The first perspective is that of the beliefs or texts themselves and "involves sorting out the elements in the text, noting the mix of little and great tradition elements." In Antoun's case, he examines a set of sermons. It could also include school curriculum, myths, folktales, and explanations of ritual practices (Antoun 1989, 5). The second perspective is that of the linker and interpreter (e.g. preacher). Linkers and interpreters, or cultural brokers, must be part of the community to which they wish to convey the tradition if they are to be effective (Antoun 1989, 656). The third perspective is that of a cognitive system. The fourth is that of social structure. The final perspective is that of the common folk (1989, 5).

One place of interaction between the textual traditions and local concerns in this discourse is the Friday sermon (Antoun 1989, xiii). Antoun describes the *khutba*, or Friday congregational sermon, as "a formal oral presentation delivered and subdivided according to set rules and interspersed with well-known prayer formulas, Quranic verses, and Traditions of the Prophet." But more than that, "it is an opportunity for the preacher to articulate the formal religious message of Islam with the needs of the community, its problems and its weltanschauung" (1989, xiii).

Islamic education is another locus of this discourse. Soebardi and Woodcroft-Lee point out the role of *pesantren* (residential Islamic schools) in the spread of Islam in the rural areas in Java (1982). Johns states that many of the concerns in the Islamic literature of Southeast Asia seem to concern the pastoral needs of the communities for whom the authors were writing (1975). A religious teacher draws from the texts and traditions for the spiritual benefit of his followers. Specific needs and concerns are addressed, and the shape of local concerns will influence the concerns of the religious instruction and secondary texts. This specifically local instruction would be repeated by teachers in an educational chain.

Islamic discourse has long included trans-national communication. For several centuries, ideas have circulated around the Islamic world via traveling scholars. First Mecca and then Cairo emerged as centers of Islamic learning where students from the Ivory Coast to Mindanao would come to study (Roff 1987b, 36). When they would go home the former students would attract students of their own, spreading the ideas they learned in these learning centers. Not all the teachers in these centers of learning are Arabs. For example, during the nineteenth century several prominent scholars in Mecca were from the Malay Archipelago (Snouck Hurgronje 1931, 276–9; Dhofier 1982, 89). Furthermore, texts are commonly circulated between various Islamic societies (e.g. Johns 1965). Roff cites a 1937 case in Kelantan, Malaya, regarding the polluting nature of dog saliva which brought *'ulama'* from other places (Roff 1988, 29).

The question remains, what are the criteria for selecting what is included in the discourse and what is not? Asad says a practice is Islamic if "it is authorized by the discursive tradition of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims—whether by an *'alim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent" (Asad 1986, 15). What Asad would and would not include is unclear. Woodward states that the criteria for determining whether something is Islamic should not focus on *shari'a*-centric conceptions of piety. The criteria must consider "the degree to which core symbols, beliefs, and modes of religious action are derived from interpretation of Muslim texts and tradition" (1988, 62).

The concepts of *sunna* and *ijma'* contribute much to a theory of a discursive Islam. A most basic definition of *sunna* is the codified traditions (Gellner 1981, 63). The establishment of *sunna* requires scholarly consensus (*ijma'*). In arriving at *ijma'* there may be room for *ijtihad* (interpretation). To what degree could *sunna* be seen as continually evolving? As Islam spread, to what degree was *sunna* redefined by local scholars?

Davies answers the above questions by suggesting the procedure of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) developed in order to understand how to apply Islam to cultural settings other than Arabia (Davies 1988, 63). In this process, the scholars' decisions about what is *halal* (permitted) and what is *haram* (forbidden) shaped the *sunna* of Islam. She states,

> The examination of *al-urf*, customary usage and practice, subject to the categories of *halal* and *haram*, was one way customs were validated and entered into the cultural body of Islam. All that was not expressly prohibited was permitted according to the framework, and since the Prophet himself had cautioned against burdensome restrictions affirming local custom was therefore in keeping with the conceptual framework (Davies 1988, 62).

This process of incorporating customary practices into Islam is based on public interest and utility (Davies 1988, 62). Hence, if a local practice did not interfere with the goals of Islam, it was embraced and transformed into an Islamic practice. However,

the meaning of *ijma'* shifted from a general consensus to a consensus of the scholarly elite (Messick 1988, 645). This shift suggests that any notion of a discursive tradition based on *ijma'* excludes popular voices as part of the discourse.

5. Critique of the Discourse Approach

While the idea of discursive traditions seems fresh, it is not clear how new this approach really is. Firstly, Marshall Hodgson suggested such an approach in the 1950s and 1960s (Eickelman 1987, 18). Secondly, although Redfield's paradigm was indeed overly mechanistic, it did call for the study of the interaction of great and little traditions. The idea of "discursive traditions" is the Redfield paradigm dressed in contemporary jargon. Redfield was right; practitioners of a little tradition do tend to have a sense of a wider tradition. What the concept of discursive traditions contributes is not a totally new paradigm, but the introduction of individual discussants. The great-and-little-traditions dichotomy, like much theoretical work of the 1950s, was overly functionalistic in its orientation. The discursive tradition approach can overcome this peril, but it too must tread carefully to avoid it.

To fully understand the significance of Islam as a discursive tradition we must understand the nature of social discourse. Discourse can be defined as the social process of constructing shared meaning. This process is necessarily social, although it may not require actors to interact on a face-to-face basis; discourse can be conducted through texts. Discourse is historically situated; an instance of the discourse necessarily involves the history of it. Discourse is political; the power relations between individuals, or groups of individuals, shape the nature of the discourse: what is said, how it is said, and the nature of the response it invokes.

Asad states that orthodoxy is not just a body of opinion but is rather a relationship of power (Asad 1986, 15). Therefore, the task of an anthropology of Islam is to understand the historical production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions. It will also be concerned with both the transformation of discursive traditions and "the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence" (Asad 1986, 17). The concern with the social organization of tradition found in the Redfield paradigm suggests the role of power in the discursive nature of any tradition. Although Redfield, and those who use his paradigm, are not explicitly concerned with the power relations, the very fact that great traditions are seen as those of the urban elite and that little traditions are those of the masses suggests the inherent power imbalance in the relationship between great and little traditions.

Ewing states that, in the history of Islam, the periods of greatest discourse about the nature of Islam and society have occurred in periods of political upheaval and change (1988, 6). For example, because of the threat to Islamic identity posed by British rule in India, the question of what behaviors were acceptable for Muslims was thrust into the forefront. Practices which previously had been non-problematic

were deemed un-Islamic in order better to define Islamic ethnic identity (1988, 15, 17). Much of the debate and controversy in Islamic societies about how to be a good Muslim is about defining the relationship of the Islamic community with sometimes secular national governments.

We would be mistaken if we assumed that only things Islamic entered into Islamic discourse. The process of determining *halal* and *haram* allows local cultural features to enter into the discourse. However, what if there was a great tradition already in a region when it was Islamicized? Redfield suggests, in regards to Latin America, that to consider Orthodox Catholicism as the great tradition and folk Catholicism as the little tradition is to commit a sin of omission. Folk Catholicism needs to be understood as a little tradition that draws on at least two great traditions: Roman Catholicism and the great traditions of aboriginal America (Mayan, Incan, Aztecan) (1956, 78). Similar circumstances exist in some Islamic countries. For example, before Java was Islamicized the kingdoms of Java were Hindu-Buddhist (Saivite) in their orientation. An argument could be made that the little traditions of Java draw upon both the great traditions of Islam and the great traditions of the peculiar form of Hindu-Buddhism that was known only in Java. For example, an important Sufi concept is the distinction between external (*zahir*) and internal (*batin*). Judith Becker argues that in the pre-Islamic Javanese Hindu-Buddhism very similar distinctions existed (1993, 35). In establishing *zahir*[3] and *batin* as important to Javanese Islam, the discourse involved two great traditions. Because this particular doctrine was not forbidden (*haram*) it was permissible (*halal*). Further, this doctrine had strong congruencies with Islamic mysticism, and hence was probably embraced as a bridge between the message and the Javanese populace.

Not only may Islamic discourse include local traditions and other great traditions, but it may also include concerns about modernization, development, and nationalism. As each Muslim society deals with placing local concerns within Islamic discourse, the problems of modernization, development, and relationships with national governments become part of the Islamic discourse. Clifford Geertz sees scripturalism as attempting to deal with the problems of modernization within an Islamic framework (1968, 62). Various Islamic groups have also asked what are the proper Islamic forms of development. The arguments often concern social justice, democracy, and participatory development, all of which have been justified and understood in Islamic terms (Lukens-Bull 1996; Yatin 1987, 167).

If we are to understand Islam as a somehow connected discursive tradition and not a myriad of discursive local traditions, we need to understand what links various local "islams" together. What is similar in the various local practices; what is different and why? To do this we need to develop a comparative study of local "islams." Although anthropologists base their careers on the intensive study of one society (ethnography), they also are concerned, at some level, with a comparative venture (ethnology). An ethnology of Islam is needed.

A good ethnological comparison of two Islamic societies, although lacking in the ethnography of each case, is Clifford Geertz's *Islam Observed* (1968) which compares Moroccan Islam and Javanese Islam. Strikingly, it remains the only monograph of its kind. While both Moroccan and Javanese Islam drew upon the same general set of symbols, the end result in each society was radically different because of the social climate in which they each evolved (1968, 20). Islam and the social climate in each location interacted in both particularizing and generalizing ways. Geertz argues that the universality of a great tradition comes from its "ability to engage a widening set of individual, even idiosyncratic, conceptions of life and yet somehow sustain and elaborate them all" (1968, 14).

The particularizing forces of Islam attempted to accommodate what Geertz considers a universal, standardized, unchangeable, and well-integrated system of rituals and beliefs to a local moral and metaphysical landscape. The generalizing forces attempted to deal with this flexibility and maintain not only the identity of Islam as religion in general but also "the particular directives communicated by God to mankind through the preemptory prophecies of Muhammad" (1968, 15). Islamic societies can be compared with each other in terms of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances (Geertz 1968, 66).

It is interesting to note that, for Geertz, it is the earlier, mystical, forms of Islam that are more susceptible to particularization than are the scripturalist, or fundamentalist, forms of Islam. Although each society has Sufi saint cults, the exact nature of these cults is different. Further, a saint or an Islamic culture hero from one of these societies would be neither saintly or heroic in the other. On the other hand, according to Geertz, scripturalism looks pretty much the same regardless of the setting. This overlooks two facts. First, a great deal of communication has always been common in the Islamic world; philosophical texts have long been circulated. While the particular myths and parables used to communicate mystical ideas vary, the basic ideas, or at least the broad set of ideas drawn upon, are the same. Second, while fundamentalists do say and do some things that may not seem out of place among fundamentalists in another country, they also have very local concerns. To draw a methodological distinction between mystical and normative Islam, as Geertz does, is a mistake.

At this point, it is useful to review a few case studies to see some of the various aspects which comprise the Islamic discursive tradition. Roff describes a debate which took place in Kelantan, Malaya, in 1937 over the relative cleanliness of dogs. The Raja Kelantan, the heir apparent and younger brother of the Sultan of Kelantan, kept a dog. His sister objected to the dog, stating that, according to the *shari'a*, dogs are polluting. The Raja Kelantan sought the legal opinion of a scholar (*'alim*) who had recently returned from Mecca. The matter quickly became one of public concern, and eventually a public council of debate (*majilis muzakara*) was convened. Scholars were brought in from Singapore and elsewhere if they were educated in Islamic learning centers outside of Malaya. The debate was about much more than the purity of dogs; it was about the basis of Islamic authority in a changing world (Roff 1988, 29).

Elsewhere, I have discussed the Indonesian Islamic discourse about development (Lukens-Bull 1996). A new sort of Islamic scholar has recently emerged in Indonesia. This new breed of scholars have western education in addition to, or even instead of, traditional Islamic education (Dhofier 1992, 26). Their role in the Indonesian Islamic community is not yet clearly defined. They are learned and respected men, but they are not traditional *'ulama'*. Within the Indonesian Islamic discourse about development, they are trying to define three things: (1) their role within the Indonesian Islamic community, (2) their role in national politics, and (3) the role of Islam in the Republic of Indonesia. One way in which Muslim intellectuals define these things is through a careful selection of the symbols, models, and metaphors used to discuss development. Different groups select different Islamic symbols to emphasize (Lukens-Bull 1996).

Sandria Freitag has discussed how in North India, certain aspects of Islamic life such as prayer, the mosque, the Qur'an, and the *shari'a* were isolated and became a "shorthand" to represent the entirety of Islamic life (1988, 144). An important basis of this discourse was a long-held division between the *ashraf* (elite) and low "caste" Muslims. She states that the elite had long enjoyed a superior social position and many claimed *sharif* status. The elite emphasized education, literary and artistic accomplishment, the study of Islamic law, and Muslim reformist activities. Freitag argues that although this elite way of life was shared with non-Muslims as well, those who embraced it thought of it as Islamic (1988, 144). In the wake of the political changes accompanying British rule, this version of Islam gradually became the only acceptable "orthodoxy." The less *shari'a*-centric practices of the non-elite Muslims was abandoned as not sufficiently distinctive vis-à-vis their Hindu neighbors.

The three cases above barely begin to cover the degree of diversity in Islamic discourse. However, they point to the central role of elites in many local Islamic discourses. In a sense, without the elite there would not have been these cases. In Kelantan, the debate started as a palace dispute. It quickly involved questions of authority based on Islamic training. In contemporary Indonesia, Muslim intellectuals are part of a small circle of people directly involved in the discourse about the nature of society. Their legitimacy is based on a predominantly Western education and a degree of public piety. In North India, the practices of the elite became the standards for all Muslims. These cases also demonstrate the importance of ethnology in anthropological studies of Islam.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed various concerns facing anthropologists of world religions. It has focused on the specific problems faced by anthropologists of Islam. The primary problem is that of defining what is meant (to the anthropologist) by the term "Islam."

The theoretical question "What is Islam?" and the theological question "What is Islam?" are not the same. The theoretical question must be addressed and wrestled with by every ethnographer of an Islamic society. The theoretical question is what must be included, and what can be excluded, in our analyses of things Islamic. The theoretical problem is that of level of analysis. The theological question addresses the ontological status of things and seeks the foundations of faith within the tradition. These two questions, while dealing with similar cultural forms, are fundamentally different. However, because the forms and the discourses about them overlap there is a danger that these questions become conflated.

With the above caveat in mind, I would like to suggest that an anthropological definition of Islam begin at the same point that a Muslim definition of Islam does. This is not an unusual proposition; many have proposed such a starting point. However, I would like to start with the Islamic definition of "Islam" as submission to God. All Muslims will agree with this definition. Where they differ is in defining how one should go about submitting to God. A comparative study of the different conceptions of how to submit to God (that is, how to be a Muslim) should be the central task of an anthropology of Islam.

This task, as I have described it, puts the anthropologist in a strange, and sometimes uncomfortable, subject position. Frequently, I find myself in situations like the one I described at the top of this essay. I am alternately a perverter of truth, the preserver and defender of minority views, and the scientific observer of what Muslims actually do. The last role is the one I was trained to play, and I know it well. The other two are thrust upon me by some of my interlocutors. It is not only Orthoprax Muslims that see ethnographic studies of Muslims as missing the mark. As detailed above, many Western scholars, even anthropologists, wish to essentialize Islam. For them, there needs to be a real, true Islam with which local practice can be compared. This approach certainly simplifies research because it allows anthropologists to get a firm grasp on a complicated and shifting part of the lives of the people they study. There is a tradition in anthropology called "salvage ethnography" in which the anthropologist records and preserves the "way things were." This tradition means that there is a tendency for ethnographic studies of local practice to be seen as the defense of minority views. Given the realities of research and writing, I cannot retreat to safety of white towers and claim to be "only an observer of what is"; I must carefully balance all three subject positions as I strive to discover "What is Islam?"

Notes

1. A folk theory: "(1) is based on everyday experience; (2) varies among individuals, although important elements are shared; and (3) is inconsistent with principles of institutionalized [theories]" (Kempton 1987, 223).

2. In Java, the saint is identified as Seh Siti Jenar and in Persia, the saint is identified as al-Hallaj.
3. While this paper has followed the standard Arabic transliteration of this term as *zahir*, the standard transliteration for the Javanese loan word is *lahir*.

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