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Islam(s) in context:

Orientalism and the anthropology of Muslim societies and cultures

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This article begins to fill a gap in recent discussions of the future of Islamic studies with an account of the nature and significance of Anthropological and Ethnographic contributions to the study of Islam and Muslims. Drawing attention to both the problem of essence in Orientalism and the dissolution of Islam's significance for Muslims in Said's (1978) anti-Orientalism, the article examines how shifts between essence and silence have been played out in the short history of Anthropology, from colonial ethnography through functionalism to the relationship between so-called Great and Little Traditions, the fresh impetus of Geertz's (1968) *Islam Observed* and subsequent debates about Islam and plural islams. My account culminates with discussion of an increasingly specialised and interdisciplinary body of work on the reproduction and transmission of Islamic discursive traditions published mainly in American Anthropology since the 1970s and 1980s. I contend that such literature suggests a theoretical starting point for 'Muslim studies' which allows for the configuring power of social structure and the efficacy of history/tradition as Muslim habitus, as well as the contextual improvisations of human agents with diverse social positions and cultural capitals. Ultimately, my argument is that although this concern for structure, tradition and agency can be combined and emphasised in different ways, attentiveness to both similarity and difference, continuity and change, suggests one way forward beyond the essence/silence impasse in Orientalist/anti-Orientalist thinking about Muslim cultures and societies.

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In a post '7/7' context, where the UK government now appears to view the university as a site of potential threat to security as well as presenting opportunities for engineering good citizenship, I was interviewed recently as part of a state-sponsored review of *Islam at Universities in England* (Siddiqui, 2007).[1] Published in June this year, the review covers a wide range of matters including Muslim students' experiences of courses in Islamic studies, Muslim chaplaincy and universities' relationships with Muslim communities. However, the principal investigator, a respected scholar from a Muslim institution of higher education, asked me mainly about how I approached Islamic studies. During the twentieth century comparable government reviews have sought to develop the subject and related areas in

ways that could serve colonial and postcolonial foreign policy abroad (Hourani, 1991, pp. 65–70).[2] So, perhaps because the UK government is now so concerned with the politics of Muslim identities at home, I was invited to reflect, too, on how Islamic studies might illuminate the practice and interpretation of Islam in contemporary contexts, including those of multicultural Britain. My interviewer knew already that, from a multidisciplinary base in a department of Theology and Religious studies, I take a broadly anthropological and ethnographic approach to research and teaching on the living realities of Muslim cultures and societies. However, like many in the dominant textual tradition of studying Islam, he had only a general sense of what that might mean. In this article, then, I begin to fill a significant but understandable gap in recent discussions of the future of Islamic studies.

Anthropology is at once concerned with documenting the organisation of social relations and patterns of cultural practice in particular places, and in developing more or less ambitious theories accounting for similarities and differences in the lives of human beings. In terms of the study of Islam and Muslims, the ethnographies that anthropologists typically write show how Islam has become indigenised (Eickelman, 1981, p. 201), how dominant and more demotic traditions are practised, institutionalised, transmitted, coexist and are contested in various regions as well as rural and increasingly urban locations. Religion and ritual are situated in relation to other categories such as kinship and ethnicity, economics and technology, politics and ideology. In more theoretical terms, then, anthropologists have sought to assess to what extent it is possible to generalise about Muslim societies and cultures across space (and, to some extent, through time). What is the relationship between the one and the many, the universal and the particular, Islam and the empirical diversity of plural islams (El-Zein, 1977)?

Of course, all scholarly methods have their limits and ambiguities as well as possibilities and, while most anthropologists today draw upon other disciplines and sources, participant observation in the field over many months, and sometimes years, remains at the heart of the discipline's concerns. At its best, ethnography can give voice to less reductive, more bottom-up, accounts of how, for example, Islam and being Muslim is situated and creatively negotiated in the complex and often contradictory course of very different sorts of people's lives. Even as the identities of Muslims in globalised (post)modernity are being shaped by the hegemonic and homogenising discourses of nation-states, their educational institutions, as well as transnational electronic media, processes of international migration and deterritorialised movements of religious revival, highly contextualised 'thick descriptions' can open up the possibility for important 'access to the humanism of others' (Fischer & Abedi, 1990, p. xix).[3] Indeed, while postcolonial critics remain wary of the pathologies of bounded cultural essences that became associated with Anthropology in the colonial period, since the 1980s especially, a postmodernist turn within the discipline has promoted more cosmopolitan agendas for writing culture. Advocating the production of 'true fictions' more provisional and dialogical than previous scientific and positivistic approaches would have allowed (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 6), the new ethnography also urges Anthropology as a

reflexive critique of the simplistic representations of exotic others in hegemonic Western discourse (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. x).

In the present moment of local–global conflicts and crises, Islamophobia and hotly contested Muslim claims to speak in the name of Islam, I want to argue that anthropological and ethnographic agendas have an invaluable contribution to make to Islamic studies broadly conceived. Indeed, in the final report on *Islam at Universities in England*, 'The definition of Islamic Studies and the place and role of ethnographic and sociological studies of Muslims' is listed as an important theme discussed with interviewees (Siddiqui, 2007, p. 4). However, while Siddiqui follows another recent review of Islamic studies in the UK (El-Awaisi & Nye, 2006) in calling for a new field of 'the Study of Islam and Muslims', neither maps the study of Muslims ethnographically and sociologically as they do the text-based core of Islamic studies 'proper'. For example, Siddiqui concludes that the appropriateness of social-scientific techniques to the study of Islam needs to be 'more vigorously questioned than it has been' (2007, p. 7). The implication that few have previously thought about such matters clearly locates the author 'inside' a conventional view of Islamic studies. Provision for the study of Muslim cultures and societies in English universities is described as inadequate: 'This kind of subject matter, if dealt with at all, is taught under sociology or anthropology, history or politics, but the teachers fail to make much of the underlying and unifying faith dimensions' (2007, p. 36).

Siddiqui is correct to highlight the significant gap between a) the established and coherent project of studying the key sources of Islamic salvation history as well as the various genres of a classical intellectual tradition and b) the less established, more dispersed, broadly social-scientific interest in what might be called 'Muslim studies'. The main problem, perhaps especially in the UK where periods of postgraduate training are relatively short, is that few have had the opportunity to develop expertise in both the highly specialised textual scholarship usually associated with Islamic studies *and* the study of contemporary Muslim societies and cultures. It is also true that the secular ideology of social science has often failed to take the study of religion seriously, although there are many dangers too in a theologically inspired essentialism as recent critiques of Phenomenology in Religious studies make clear (Flood, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2000). However, in emphasising 'underlying and unifying faith dimensions' (2007, p. 36) Siddiqui reinforces the hegemony of normative Islam, eliding its inevitable entanglement with particular social relations and cultural patterns. As suggested already, the study of contemporary Islam and Muslims must examine relationships between the universal *and* the particular, rather than emphasising one at the expense of the other.

Writing back to the textual centre of Islamic studies from its ethnographic and sociological periphery, then, this article focuses mainly on the changing ways that the study of Islam and Muslims has been conceived in Anthropology, from colonial ethnography through

functionalism to the relationship between so-called Great and Little Traditions, the fresh impetus of Clifford Geertz's (1968) *Islam Observed* and subsequent debates about Islam and plural islams. My account culminates with discussion of an increasingly specialised and interdisciplinary body of work on the reproduction and transmission of Islamic discursive traditions published mainly in American Anthropology since the 1970s and 1980s.[4] Perhaps inevitably, however, I begin with Edward Said's (1978) deconstruction of the discourse of the dominant paradigm of Islamic studies in the modern West, a critique which has been hugely influential in reinforcing the significance of postcolonial and poststructuralist perspectives in Anthropology and ethnography, as well as Middle Eastern studies.

(Mis)representing Islam? Orientalism, Said and his critics

As Bryan S. Turner (1991) argues, at the root of Orientalism is the more general problem of studying 'other cultures'. He sees Orientalism as the accounting system that 'the West' produced in modern times in its attempt to make sense of its relationship with 'the East', and especially Islam.[5] Of course, Turner's work on classical Sociology's constructions of the Muslim East has much in common with the better known study by Said (1978) whose research focused on representations of the Orient in modern French and British scholarship since the eighteenth century.[6] It was at this point that Europe's interests in the Middle East and Asia were beginning to take the form of political and cultural as well as economic domination. Crucially for Said, the quest for an ever more systematic knowledge of the East—from Philology to Ethnography—was bound up with the extension of Western imperial power: 'Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it'. (1978, p. 3)

Said argues that, for all their careful scholarship and individual creativity (1978, pp. 14–15), Orientalists still habitually reproduced a self-referencing, coherent discourse about Islam and Muslim societies, one that could not remain objective or neutral in the face of broader ideological currents:[7] 'No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his [*sic*] involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position or from the mere activity of being a member of a society. These continue to bear on what he [*sic*] does professionally'. (Said, 1978, p. 10)

Indeed, Said maintains Orientalist discourse maintained an 'ontological and epistemological distinction' (1978, p. 1) between a traditional, unchanging and irrational Orient and a modern, progressive and rationalising Occident. The East became something of an invented alter-ego so that: 'European culture gained strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self' (1978, p. 3). In summary, Said's argument is that Orientalist stereotypes of an Eastern 'Other' actually tell us more about the ideological 'desires, repressions, investments and projections' (1978, p. 8) of the West itself.

Over the years, Said's (1978) polemic has been criticised by scholars of various disciplines for: being 'passionately argued yet curiously ahistorical' (Eickelman, 1981, p. 24); tarring all Orientalists with the same brush (Clarke, 1997); perpetuating a pernicious Occidentalism (Carrier, 1995) and encouraging the anti-Westernism of Islamic fundamentalists; ignoring the way in which the West has historically drawn upon Eastern (including Islamic) ideas as a self-critical mirror to itself (Turner, 1991; Clarke, 1997); and treating Islam and Christianity by markedly different standards (Mellor, 2004). For all its errors and inconsistencies, such criticisms do not always reflect the many qualifications in *Orientalism* or take into account Said's (1993, 1995) later work.[8] Neither should they distract from the broad truth of its overall thesis. Nevertheless, a key difficulty remains. Having deconstructed Orientalist discourse, Said does not advance an alternative model for representing Islam or Muslims. Ironically, he fails, as Orientalists did, to give sufficient agency to the insider accounts that concern anthropologists and others (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), revealing himself as a secular critic who addresses himself principally to a Western readership, while at the same time divesting Islam of much social and cultural significance (Mellor, 2004). The problem is that, as Binder rightly argues, 'the negation of Orientalism is not the affirmation of Islam' (cited by Sayyid, 1997, p. 35).

To be fair to Said, he has since underlined that he did not set out to provide an alternative to Orientalism: 'I have no interest in, much less capacity for, showing what the true Orient or Islam really are' (1995, p. 331). Orientalist accounts of the East are 'not truth but representations … [not] natural depictions of the Orient' (1978, pp. 20–21). Moreover, Said insists that 'never has there been such a thing as a pure or unconditioned Orient' (1978, pp. 22–23). This reflects Said's anti-essentialism, his poststructuralist commitment to the idea that the Orient, the East and Islam are all social constructions and do not have a 'stable reality' (1995, p. 331). Of course, one of the influences on Said (1978, p. 3) in this respect was the Marxist-influenced French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault, whose work has illuminated the subtle and diffuse operation of power relations in society.[9] However, given his understanding that every representation reveals only a representer, Foucault implied that a false representation cannot simply be replaced with a true one (King, 1999). The best one can hope for is an archaeology of competing regimes of truth. In following Foucault, Said would seem to have fallen into the most extreme of postmodernist traps—deconstructing himself (as well as Islam and Muslims) into almost complete silence.

Turner (1991) insists that one of the main problems with Said's work, then, is that, like Foucault, he can be read as suggesting that our knowledge of the world can only ever be ethnocentric. While there seems little doubt that we all, inevitably, approach 'others' initially in terms of our own historically located categories, and moreover that perfect cultural translations are virtually impossible (Asad, 1993), the idea that we can only ever really know or understand ourselves would seem unreasonably pessimistic. As Mellor

maintains, it also ignores human beings' 'common embodiment' (2004, p. 110). Indeed, on closer inspection, Said is rather inconsistent about the extent to which he supports Foucault's social constructionism and absolute relativism. So, while he seems to follow the French philosopher in denying the existence of any 'real' Orient, he also suggests that 'Orientalist "visions" and "textualizations" … suppress an authentic "human" reality' although, for Clifford, this still belies 'the absence … of any developed theory of culture as a differentiating and expressive ensemble rather than as simply hegemonic and disciplinary' (1988, pp. 258, 263). Reflecting on the limits of his work, Said himself acknowledges that: 'Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and people from a libertarian or a non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective. But then one would have to rethink the whole complex of knowledge and power. These are all tasks left embarrassingly incomplete in this study'. (1978, p. 24)

Said has evidently illuminated something of the limits of Western representations of Islam for scholars across a number of disciplines. However, in general, contemporary anthropologists have not been as reticent as he was concerning the discussion of alternatives to Orientalist forms of thinking. While responses to a crisis of representation have advocated a nativist Anthropology at one extreme and Anthropology as autobiography at the other (Bennett, 1996, pp. 172ff.), more cosmopolitan approaches such as those mentioned in the introduction stress that cultural similarity and difference is intelligible but should be explored in the context of reflexive and dialogical engagement, as well as more negotiated outcomes.[10] Of course, such interventions can only begin to ameliorate rather than 'rethink the whole complex of knowledge and power' (Said, 1978, p. 24), making it more explicit and transparent. Indeed, while few anthropological studies of Islam and Muslims today can reasonably be accused of the sort of imperialist ethnocentrism highlighted by Said (Tapper, 1995, p. 187), and some anthropologists have made key contributions to such debates, the number of ethnographic studies that have embraced postmodernist methodologies remains relatively small.[11] What follows tracks the relationship between Orientalism and the ethnography of the Muslim world, first of all in terms of the framing of the postcolonial crisis of representation in Anthropology and then in terms of reflections upon the historical separation of textual and ethnographic scholarship, as well as their more recent re-acquaintance.

Orientalism, Anthropology and the ethnography of Muslim societies to the 1960s

There are few specific references to Anthropology in *Orientalism* apart from brief praise for the work of Clifford Geertz 'whose interest in Islam is [said to be] discrete and concrete enough to be animated by the specific societies and problems he studies' (Said, 1978, p. 326). Nevertheless, Said was clearly concerned with the Othering of the Orient in ethnographic as well as literary texts. Indeed, he did eventually address himself more directly to Anthropology (Said, 1989), acknowledging Marxist and feminist developments in

the discipline, as well as the postmodernist turn in writing ethnography mentioned earlier. However, Said admitted that, in general, he still found anthropologists 'among the most unwilling to accept' the limitations that social, economic and political circumstances of domination place upon research (1989, p. 211). As Thomas argues in a review of the impact of *Orientalism* on Anthropology, Said draws attention to the way that: 'anthropologists tend to see their portraits of peoples studied as the outcomes of a singular and personal experience, while neglecting the importance of genre constraints and enduring rhetorical forms' (1991, p. 7).

Of course, as Clifford (1988) remarks, the crisis of representation in Anthropology pre-dates Said. By the 1960s and early 1970s, the discipline was being challenged by critiques from within, some of which drew direct comparisons between Orientalism and Anthropology (Asad, 1973). A somewhat schematic description of Anthropology's colonial origins might trace the early appropriation of nineteenth-century evolutionist ideas to legitimate the control of 'primitive' peoples, while functionalism's later documentation of the workings of societies supported their management by more established European regimes (Stocking, 1991, p. 4). However, the role of anthropologists (rather like Orientalists) in colonial governance was actually relatively trivial and did not reflect imperial ideology in any simple sense. The anthropologist and postcolonial critic, Talal Asad, is perhaps more clear than Said that the 'bourgeois consciousness of which social anthropology is merely one fragment, has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities—and therefore the potential for transcending itself' (1973, p. 18). Nevertheless, elsewhere he too insists that 'the fact of European power, as a discourse and practice, was always part of the reality anthropologists sought to understand, and of the way they sought to understand it' (Asad, 1991, p. 315).

In the Middle East, Napoleon's short-lived invasion of Egypt (1798–1801) and his survey of the country (*Description de l'Égypte*, published 1820) had foreshadowed a new drive for ethnographic knowledge under colonial powers (Said, 1978, p. 87; Eickelman, 1981, pp. 25–27). From the mid-nineteenth century especially, European control also made travel to the great cities of the Muslim world and beyond secure for individual Western travellers, writers and scholars. Fluent in Arabic and other Islamic languages, and often adopting native dress and names, trained Orientalists, including some discussed by Said such as the Britons Edward Lane (d. 1876) and Richard Burton (d. 1890), took up extended periods of residence in the Middle East, producing descriptions consumed by a voracious Western reading public.[12] However, notably, some commentators such as Eickelman (1981, p. 24) do not read colonial ethnography through Foucauldian spectacles, at once acknowledging arrogance and prejudice in the attitudes of many Europeans, yet praising their linguistic skills and ethnographic legacy.[13] For example, the Scottish biblical scholar and historian of religion, William Robertson Smith (d. 1894), travelled to Egypt and North Africa several times during the nineteenth century. Eickelman's assessment includes a recognition that he (for example,

Robertson Smith, 1889) combined a novel interest in theorising Arab society with a serious respect for Muslim traditions of scholarship (1981, p. 37; cf. Said, 1978, pp. 234–237).

Whatever their contested history, these proto-anthropological accounts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries knew no necessary distinction between Philology and Ethnography, the study of text and cultural context respectively. However, few Orientalists followed in the footsteps of these early scholars, and while the Finn Edward Westermarck (d. 1939) described aspects of Moroccan folklore and customs including the cult of saints (1968), as the discipline became more professionalised and concerned with theory, anthropological studies of Muslim societies were rare again until the 1960s. A division of labour became institutionalised which 'meant that Orientalists were uninterested in tribal studies or even in living people, while anthropologists avoided cities and rarely read texts' (Lindholm, 2002, p. 118). For the latter this 'had the practical consequence of making textual ignorance into a virtue' (2002, p. 120). Orientalists studied elite and privileged traditions, while anthropologists studied the oral culture of the illiterate masses.

As a discipline that assumed its modern form in the later colonial period just short of a century ago, the history of Anthropology's discourse on Islam and Muslims is a relatively brief one. The holistic approach of functionalism dominated Anthropology from the 1920s–1950s and it was during this period that there was a turn-away from interest in the Middle East and Muslim world as a complex, larger-scale, historically known civilisation with various literary traditions. After the founding fathers, Franz Boas (d. 1942) and Bronislaw Malinowski (d. 1942), who both emphasised stringent fieldworking methodology as well as cultural relativism/historical particularism and the functionality of social institutions respectively, anthropologists preferred to conduct their research in smaller-scale, relatively isolated and socially closed villages or tribes. There was also a relative lack of interest in social change and transformation, for example in terms of the connection of human communities to the world economy or to movements for political independence (Eickelman, 1981, p. 50). When anthropologists did turn to the Middle East or North Africa they tended to conduct their observation amongst nomads or pastoralists. Indeed, perhaps the first ethnography of an Islamic context in the modern era was E. E. Evans-Pritchard's (1949) study of the Sanusi inter-tribal religious brotherhood of Cyrenaica. An account of the structure of tribes which downplays the impact of Italian colonial power in Libya, it demonstrate a serious interest in history nevertheless.

From the 1940s and 1950s an opportunity to revisit the legacy of earlier work traversing literate world civilisations and popular folk traditions opened up in the writings of American anthropologist Robert Redfield (1941), and others. Working on peasants in Mexico rather than tribes in Africa, he was critical of the discipline's overemphasis on particular local cultures in the face of clear evidence of coexistence and cross-fertilisation with urban cultures. Thus he developed an interest in the social organisation of tradition, the linkages

and interchanges between so-called 'Great' and 'Little' Traditions in complex societies. In studies of India, these processes were later elaborated especially by Marriott (1955) in terms of 'parochialisation' (the transmission of urban ideas to folk ideas) and 'universalisation' (folk ideas to urban ideas). However, while the general significance of Redfield's work on tradition remains suggestive for some, his model has been criticised for assuming an ahistorical evolution from the folk culture of unreflective peasants to that of normative urban textual culture (Antoun, 1989, pp. 42–43).

Lacking the language skills to study the Islamic texts that Orientalists handled so authoritatively,[14] if they mentioned Islam in any detail at all, Western anthropologists working in Muslim societies tended simply to note what a specific community had accepted from the Great Tradition, for example the requirements of the five pillars (*arkan*), and what had been assimilated through the Little Tradition, for example the veneration of saints and visitation (*ziyarah*) at their tombs (Eickelman, 1981, p. 203; Bowen, 1993, p. 5). Reflecting on this state of affairs in a rare overview of the literature, Lindholm suggests some further reasons why Islam was 'neither very important nor very controversial' in Anthropology (2002, p. 111). He explains this 'vacancy' in part because of the 'austere and seemingly simple … sober and pragmatic' (2002, pp. 112– 113) character of Islam, for example the relative lack of theological speculation and elaborate ritual and myth in Sunni orthodoxy. Interestingly, given Muslims' longstanding Otherness in Western culture, Lindholm also contends that Islam's kinship with the Judaeo-Christian traditions has rendered much of its belief and practice 'too familiar' to be of interest.[15] In terms of his own fieldwork, he reflects on the pervasiveness of Islam amongst the illiterate Pukhtuns of Swat, northern Pakistan. However, perhaps recalling Redfield's sense of an unreflective Little Tradition, he argues that it was un-contentious and relatively unchanging, something that sat rather lightly on his respondents compared especially to the importance of kin-based honour alliances. Indeed, Lindholm contends that his own experience was much the norm amongst ethnographers of his generation and earlier during the 1950s, 1960s and into the 1970s. Certainly, many of those established anthropologists who do now write about Islam report that when they first set out on their fieldwork they had no intention of doing so (see, for example, Launay, 1992, p. xix; Bowen, 1993, p. 3; Varisco, 2005, p. 19).

Between essence and dissolution: from Islam to islams?

Varisco's (2005, p. 17) analysis of selected anthropologists' representations of Islam suggests that until recently those who did study the category of religion tended to focus on the exoticism of Sufism. Sufi saints and their cults were seen as interesting Little Traditions mainly because they seemed to act as external mediating forces able to cross-cut ties of kinship in segmented societies (see, for example, Barth, 1965; Gellner, 1969). Ernest Gellner, who built on the British tradition of structural functionalism associated with A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (d. 1955) and Evans-Pritchard, began by detailing the sorts of arbitration between rival Berber tribes enabled by Sufis in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco (Gellner, 1969).

However, he also elaborated an influential theory of Muslim society (1968, 1981, 1992) which made much of the distinction between 'Great' and 'Little', or in Gellner's terms 'High' and 'Low', Traditions. Gellner draws on a range of thinkers from Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) to David Hume (d. 1776) in order to develop the notion of a 'pendulum swing' back and forth between the 'high Islam of the scholars and the low Islam of the people' (1992, p. 9), the urban political centre and the autonomous tribal periphery.[16] This process of flux and reflux, argues Gellner, has come to a halt in modern times. Whereas the purifications of scripturalist reformers would traditionally have given way to a return of the magic, consolation, therapy, mediation and ecstasy associated with the cults of saints, the new centralising power of the city and the state has seen a: 'definitive and … irreversible reformation. There has been an enormous shift in the balance *from* Folk *to* High Islam. The social bases of Folk Islam have been in large part eroded, whilst those of High Islam were greatly strengthened … Identification with Reformed Islam has played a role very similar to that played by nationalism elsewhere … indeed it is difficult to distinguish the two. The tribe has fallen apart, the shrine is abandoned. Islam provides a national identity, notably in the context of the struggle with colonialism … It also provides a kind of ratification of the social ascension of many contemporary Muslims, from rustic status to becoming better informed town-dwellers'. (1992, pp. 15–16, italics in original)

Gellner's work is undoubtedly insightful and authoritatively written but it tends to divide contemporary opinion quite violently. For Lindholm, a fan from the same tradition committed to Anthropology as a generalising science, 'his model remains the most powerful' (2002, p. 117). Underlining that Anthropology is not simply concerned with ethnography, Gellner himself revealingly concluded 'any model is better than none' (1981, p. 85). However, even Lindholm acknowledges that Gellner, like other key theorists to conduct fieldwork in Muslim societies such as Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu, explored little of key Islamic doctrines or practices. Gellner was more concerned with 'the way in which ecology, social organisation, and ideology interlock in one highly distinctive civilisation … it explains *how* their distinctive fusion produced its stabilities and tensions' (Gellner, 1981, p. 85, italics in original). Not surprisingly, those in the postmodernist tradition are extremely critical of Gellner's epistemology (as he was of theirs).[17] Asad (1986), for example, challenges him for reproducing the essentialism at the heart of Orientalism, where the conceptual basis for a general theory of Islam is based simply upon the reversal of the 'High' Catholic/ 'Low' Protestant binary in Christianity (1986, p. 5).[18] For Varisco, with no church and no priesthood 'Islam is not Christianity … Islam is its own Ceasar … Islam is all state' (2005, pp. 72–73). The way in which the Great and Little Traditions each map onto a specific social structure in Gellner's work is seen now as too neat and highly schematised. As an advocate of poststructuralism Asad insists that it is impossible to generalise explanations, as Gellner does, in terms of the essence of tribes, the Middle East or Islam. It is the divergent material conditions of different times and places—the contexts of reproduction rather than textual or other origins—that are significant. Gellner asserts the authority of 'being there', of having done fieldwork, but, accused by some of a cavalier Eurocentrism, he fails to

engage the plurality of Muslim voices 'as if Islam itself, as Muslims define it, does not matter' (Varisco, 2005, p. 72).

Like Gellner, Clifford Geertz was another who employed work on Morocco as part of a grander project of anthropological generalisation about Islam.[19] However, in *Islam Observed* (1968) he compared North African material in novel ways with his earlier work on Java and Indonesia (Geertz, 1960). Indeed, Launay contends that it was only with the publication of *Islam Observed* 'that Islam in and of itself became an explicit object of anthropological study' (1992, p. 3). Echoing Lindholm, Launay suggests that, hitherto, anthropologists saw religion simply as a component of local culture. Indeed, delivered initially as a series of lectures to scholars of religion, *Islam Observed* is in many ways primarily an exercise in Comparative Religion. Influenced by Max Weber, Geertz illuminates generalised themes including the significance of historical course, social change, institutions, modernity and identity in one tribal and one peasant society.[20] Whereas Gellner was associated with the longstanding objectivist British tradition of structural functionalism, in the American tradition of cultural relativism, Geertz was a key figure in newer, more humanities-oriented, interpretative and symbolic perspectives which read cultural systems as 'texts'.

However, as the idea of an Anthropology of Islam has matured, others have raised issues with Geertz's seminal text. Lindholm (2002, p. 122) suggests that it leaves behind a functionalist interest in social structure for a 'chaotic picture',[21] while Bowen (1993, p. 5) remarks that it still says very little indeed about the shared beliefs and practices of Muslims. Despite the fact that, as we have seen, even Said (1978, p. 326) praised Geertz's particularism, and despite his contribution to rethinking ethnographic writing, later postmodernists have argued that *Islam Observed* also tends to reproduce the silences and lack of agency evident in both neo-Orientalists like Gellner and anti-Orientalists like Said. In this regard Varisco is especially blunt, complaining that: 'Flesh and blood Muslims are obscured, visible only through cleverly contrived representation and essentialized types' (2005, p. 29). Geertz's resort to 'myriad contrasting pairs' (2005, p. 30)—Moroccan nerve, formalism and rigour; Indonesian diligence, intellectualism and syncretism—produces an all-too-generalised 'reduction of complex social and political conditions to isms and ists' (2005, p. 32): 'Geertz waltzed in with *Islam Obscured* [*sic*], but he knew better than to bring any real villagers with him … How exactly does the comparative study of religion suffer when the people who live the religion on a day-by-day basis are consulted? By leaving the ethnography out, these questions are not even raised, let alone resolved'. (2005, p. 51)

In 1977, the American-based Egyptian anthropologist Abdul Hamid El-Zein published an early and much-cited review of the nascent Anthropology of Islam which set itself against the idea of 'Islam' as a universally meaningful category.[22] Taking a stand against the easy reinforcement of Orientalist constructions of a universal Islamic 'essence' and the hegemonic evaluations of religious elites (and increasingly, fundamentalists) in the Great

Tradition, he argues that anthropologists must move beyond the dichotomies of elite and folk Islam that both they and theologians have depended upon hitherto. The term 'islams', in the plural and without capitalisation, is forwarded instead. This emphasises the reality that there is no single way of being Muslim and, moreover, that no 'normative' interpretation of 'islam' is inherently more 'objective, reflective, or systematic' than a folk one (1977, p. 248). For El-Zein, Islam is not 'out there' as an objective reality; it is a reality only as a part of socio-cultural systems, and so always particular: 'we have to start from the 'native's' model of 'Islam' and analyse the relations which produce its meaning … 'Islam', without referring it to the facets of a system of which it is a part, does not exist … This logic of relations implies that neither Islam nor the notion of religion exists as a fixed and autonomous form referring to positive content which can be reduced to universal and unchanging characteristics. Religion becomes an arbitrary category which as a unified and bounded form has no necessary existence. 'Islam' as an analytical category dissolves as well'. (1977, pp. 251–252)

Varisco is unusual today in providing an enthusiastic assessment of El-Zein's approach, arguing that commentators have too often misunderstood the latter's arguments. Others have of course affirmed the importance to Anthropology of starting from the insider's account. However, as we shall see, most anthropologists interested in Muslim societies have pursued alternatives to El-Zein's apparent dissolution of Islam in moving beyond the essentialism of Orientalism. Launay (1992), for example, maintains that most Muslims would reject the idea of multiple 'islams' as theologically unacceptable. His respondents in Koko, a West African town, posited and struggled over the definition and meaning of 'Islam', seeing differences in interpretation— vis-à-vis non-Muslims and other Muslims—in terms of ignorance and incomplete knowledge. Thus while, there was no place on earth where one could observe 'pure' Islamic practice … despite tremendous variability, Islam as practiced could not be reduced to a virtually infinite series of purely local idiosyncrasies. (Launay, 1992, p. 7)

The work of Michael Gilsenan represents another early, and perhaps more widely appreciated, attempt to glimpse more clearly the 'fuzzy' social reality of Islam and Muslim identities, set against the rapid social change of the late colonial and early postcolonial period. During fieldwork in the Middle East and North Africa during the 1960s and 1970s, Gilsenan lived among new urban groupings not much written about by anthropologists in the Muslim world hitherto: 1) poor, unskilled, often rural-to-urban migrants and 2) the petite bourgeoisie—students, teachers, shopkeepers, civil servants and the like. While his (1973) study of the Shadiliya Sufi order in Cairo is well known, it is his wide-ranging *Recognizing Islam* (1982) which most obviously exhibits these shifting paradigms. Incorporating reflexive autobiography and demonstrating awareness of the problems of image and stereotype, Gilsenan resists neat typologies placing emphasis instead on 'ways of walking', of doing Anthropology as a process of 'discovery' rather than finding 'straight lines to a place' (1982, p. 271).

Gilsenan is interested principally in the ways in which, at a time of 'instability, unease, immobility' for the lower and lower-middle social classes, 'the idea of a pure tradition' takes on renewed vitality as a vehicle for public contest with the state and other Muslims. It becomes a vision for both resistance and remaking society: 'a language, a weapon against internal and external enemies, a refuge, an evasion, or part of the entitlement to domination and authority over others' (1982, p. 15). Even as he describes 'fundamentalism' Gilsenan is careful to see this phenomenon as highly variable and shifting, constituted by various movements and groups with multiple interpretations and Islam speaking of social divisions along lines of class as much as rhetorical unity (1982, p. 265). Indeed, exemplifying the approach sketched by Lindholm (2002), he reminds the reader that sometimes religion is 'only a very minor influence' (1982, p. 21): 'everything is in question, including Islam itself' (1982, p. 264).

In a context where Islam as 'a world ideological system' (1982, p. 18) 'appears' to be centre stage, Gilsenan warns that 'Contemporary events are dangerous guides to thought'. Like El-Zein, he rejects any sense of Islam as 'a single, unitary, and all determining object, a "thing" out there with a will of its own', a key to the 'Muslim mind' or the 'nature and essence of these people' (1982, p. 19). Gilsenan actively seeks to 'dissolve' and 'demystify' such notions and advance instead an altogether 'more cautious' approach to what 'Islam comes to mean in quite different economic, political, and social structures and relations' (1982, pp. 19–20). In this view, it 'identifies varying relations of practice, representation, symbol, concept, and worldview' (1982, p. 19). At one point he acknowledges that this has its 'patterns' (1982, p. 19) but he does not pursue the interesting question of how this might differ from 'essence'. While no postmodernist, as a Marxist-influenced social scientist, Gilsenan, like other anti-essentialists and anti-Orientalists, emphasises social and political change, division and difference, but without much concern for the continuity of tradition. To study Islam anthropologically is to study its 'real anchoring in social relations' (1982, p. 260).

Towards an Anthropology of Islam: the discursive tradition in socio-cultural context

'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, artefacts, customs and morals. It is a tradition'. (Asad, 1986, p. 14)

Writing in a key text on the Middle East now in its fourth edition, Eickelman was one of the first anthropologists to call attention to the necessity of a clear conceptualisation of 'what is meant by Islam and the Islamic tradition' (1981, pp. 202–203). He highlights a shift amongst some of his colleagues towards a more deliberately interdisciplinary and specialised study of religious actors, institutions and imaginaries in Muslim cultures and societies, pairing

accounts of textualised traditions of Islam with ethnography in diverse socio-cultural and historical contexts. Eickelman drew inspiration from Redfield's distinction between the Great and Little Traditions, which Antoun insists remains of importance so long as it does not become 'an unbridgeable divide' or 'superiority be assigned … to the elite tradition … and inferiority to the tradition of the folk' (1989, p. 43). Indeed, rather than any dichotomy between the two, Eickelman emphasises that at each level and segment of Muslim societies, and shaped by changing material conditions, more or less universalistic and particularistic constructions of Islam have coexisted with one other, often with a significant degree of ambiguity concerning any boundaries between them. Yet, as Eickelman's critique of El-Zein underlines, it is also clear that while the 'islams' approach appropriately calls for greater understanding of demotic Muslim voices, it erases: 'important dimensions of authority and domination in the transmission and reproduction of ideas and organizations, favoring the emergence of particular institutional arrangements or beliefs over alternative, coexisting ones'. (2002, p. 245)

Indeed, since the 1970s and 1980s, Eickelman's own work has exemplified an interest in authoritative 'carriers' of tradition and their associated institutions. A study of a Moroccan pilgrimage centre (Eickelman, 1976) was followed with an account of the education of a twentieth-century Moroccan *qadi* (judge) (Eickelman, 1985), while various edited collections have taken as their focus travel and the religious imagination (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990) and, most recently, the role of communications technology in the creation of new public spheres (Eickelman & Anderson, 1999; Salvatore & Eickelman, 2006).

While Eickelman has perhaps been the most prolific contributor to the Anthropology of Islam in ethnographic terms, the most influential theoretical intervention in the discussion thus far is still probably the lecture given by Talal Asad at Georgetown University in 1986. Tellingly, for a small and dispersed interdisciplinary sub-field with limited institutional expression, the paper has never been published in a journal or book and is only available as an occasional paper through Georgetown's Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies. Asad (1986, p. 2) begins by quickly dismissing the utility of 'nominalist' suggestions that there are simply diverse islams (El-Zein) or that Islam is what Muslims in different contexts say it is (Gilsenan). Having set out the critique of Gellner's essentialism discussed above, in the main body of his text Asad insists that generalisation about Islam *is* possible—it simply requires the right sort of conceptualisation (1986, p. 5). While most of the lecture concerns how an Anthropology of Islam should *not* be conceived, Asad does eventually elaborate on an early remark that there should be greater attention to Islam 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' (1986, p. 7).

It is evident from this conception of tradition as a discourse, as well as from his later publications, that, like Said, Asad has been much influenced by Foucault. However, rather

than being concerned with Western accounts of Islam, what marks out Asad's work is a concern with the disciplinary power of Muslim knowledges. He conceives Islam principally in ideological terms (1986, p. 15), although he is quick to distinguish his approach from that of Gilsenan for whom modern appeals to Islamic tradition are ultimately reduced to invented fictions, the result of various social, economic and political crises (see, for example, 1982, p. 226). Collapsing the binary opposition between tradition and modernity, Asad (1986, p. 14) instead affirms the significance of tradition as a meaningful and binding relationship and orientation of the present (and future) to the past. The key focus, he maintains, should be the way in which Muslims in specific social and historical contexts have been inducted into 'instituted practices': 'A practice is Islamic because it is … taught to Muslims—whether by an *'alim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent' (1986, p. 15).

Asad therefore insists on the importance of orthodoxy in societies and cultures shaped by Islam: 'Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, under-mine, or replace *incorrect* ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy' (1986, p. 15, italics in original).[23] A major concern for the Anthropology of Islam should thus be an examination of the disciplinary use and abuse of the authority of Islamic 'reasonings' by different constituencies, attempts to impose, resist and reshape them in relation to underlying conditions of possibility. Drawing inspiration from MacIntyre (1981)—and departing from Foucault who leaves very little room for resistance as we have seen—Asad insists that, rather than systemic homogeneity, debate, disagreement and contestation are all key characteristics of the Islamic discursive tradition. Although all such traditions 'aspire to coherence', emphasising material conditions once again, Asad maintains that in the contemporary period 'widespread homogeneity is a function not of tradition, but of the development and control of communication techniques that is part of modern industrial societies' (1986, pp. 16–17). Modern secular nation-states can regulate the lives of their citizens in ways unknown in the history of Muslim societies.

Unfortunately, Asad (1993, 2003) has elaborated such agendas in only a limited fashion in his work of postmodernist and postcolonial criticism.[24] It has been for others to explore in more depth the content, production, authority, interpretation and contestation of tradition in ethnography. Adding to earlier contributions to debates about writing culture (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), Fischer has perhaps been most experimental in responding to the new challenges of studying Islam and Muslims anthropologically in globalised postmodernity (Fischer & Abedi, 1990). This collaborative work built on Fischer (1980), a study of the changing face of traditional Shi'ite Iranian education in the *madrasahs* (Islamic colleges) of Qum. Elsewhere, while Rosen (1984) observed the operation of Islamic law courts in Morocco, Antoun (1989), mentioned earlier, explored the Friday sermons of a preacher and his role as 'culture broker' in rural Jordan. Gaffney (1994) has done similar on Egypt, illuminating the different orientations of a scholarly, Sufi and militant preacher respectively while Starrett (1998) has examined the transformation of Islamic education in the context of the postcolonial nation-state, religious resurgence and the globalised media.

An ethnography of particular theoretical significance is Brinkley Messick's account of the 'changing relation between writing and authority' (1993, p. 1) in the manuscript culture of nineteenth and twentieth century Yemen. Respected by textual scholars and anthropologists alike, he examines this transformation as the printing press, new forms of education and the drive to bureaucracy, standardisation and homogeneity associated with the nation-state all began to be imposed even in a society relatively free from external domination. The traditional 'calligraphic state', he suggests, 'was both a political entity and a discursive tradition', which gave expression to the hegemonies and hierarchies of 'a textual habitus' (1993, p. 251). This 'set of acquired dispositions concerning writing and the spoken word, and the authoritative conveyance of meaning in texts' (1993, p. 251) had socialised Muslims from the cradle to the grave through the structures and practices of law, ritual, education and so on. Here, Messick's analysis draws usefully on Bourdieu (1977), where the latter's notion of habitus calls important attention to the way that the structured coherence and basic dispositions of a dominant discursive formation are coupled with acknowledgement of the possibility of diverse expressions and improvisation. Thus, the sociocultural complex that is Islam can neither be reduced to a once-and-for-all blue-print following Gellner, nor the absolute particularities of local contexts after El-Zein. There is room for coherence and continuity, diversity and transformation, though Messick emphasises the latter more than Bourdieu:[25] 'While it is possible to speak generally of the Islamic 'discursive tradition', looked at in local-level detail even regional versions fragment into multiple histories. While they exhibit important shared structural regularities, the phenomena that compose a tradition also put its cohesiveness in question. For diverse structural and political reasons, the constituent genres and institutional domains changed in different ways and at different rates … Just as there was no original society of stationary traditional institutions, there is no terminus reached, no modern society completely achieved'. (1993, pp. 254–255)

While something of a consensus in the literature can be discerned in terms of the balance between patterns of the Islamic discursive tradition and contextual improvisations by Muslims with divergent cultural capitals living under conditions of specific social relations, not surprisingly, there is still plenty of room for contrasting emphases. Returning to the relationship between the universal and the particular, but moving beyond the Middle East and North Africa, John Bowen stresses how the Gayo people of Indonesia 'developed much of their local knowledge about the world by elaborating, transforming, and adapting elements from broader Muslim traditions … couch[ing] a wide variety of practices … in Islamic terms' (1993, p. 3).[26] However, Bowen emphasises that South East Asia is not the Middle East and challenges the notion of any underlying Arab-Persian pattern of social organisation in Muslim societies, something argued for by historians such as Hodgson (1974) and Lapidus (1988). For Bowen, this is 'a notion that becomes exceedingly shopworn by the time the author [Lapidus] reaches the societies of modern Southeast Asia' (1993, p. 6).[27] Based on an ethnography which stresses 'divergent ways of talking … specific social histories

… heterogeneity and dissension' (1993, pp. 10–11), like Messick he is clear that: 'there is no unifying schema or field that synoptically captures divergent discourses … no encompassing division into great and little traditions' (1993, p. 11).

However, writing out of a context where anthropologists since the 1960s have characteristically claimed the uniqueness of sub-continental Islam, the emphasis of Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (1998) is somewhat different. In an original contribution to the Islam/islams debate, they argue for the gradual 'Islamisation of the indigenous' in South Asia over a number of centuries, suggesting that while Sufi cults, for example, have given voice to genuine local diversity, they also share latent Islamic structures and themes which eventually re-imagine the new locations they come to inhabit. In her own most recent study, Werbner summarises this in the following way: 'The underlying logic of the fables constituting this religious imagination is the same logic, whether in Morocco, Iraq, Pakistan or Indonesia … The legends about powerful Sufis from Indonesia and Morocco which Geertz reproduces to exemplify the contrastive localism of Islam tell in essence the same processual narrative'. (2003, pp. 289–290)

So, while Messick and especially Bowen might want to draw Werbner back to the historical and ecological detail of local contexts, like Eickelman and Asad, all acknowledge, though to differing degrees, the authority and continuity of Islamic imaginaries in the shaping of Muslim cultures. At the same time, such scholars posit no essential dichotomy between so-called 'orthodox' and 'popular' traditions of Islam, though this is something that much neo-orthodox discourse and the scholarly literature has hitherto 'imposed upon … a single, total, symbolic reality' (Werbner & Basu, 1998, pp. 3–4).

Conclusion

'There are times, increasingly, when we need touchstones, reminders and access to the humanism of others … lives that can reach through the numbing opaqueness of news accounts of confrontation, ideological war, and endless killing; through the reifying opaqueness of histories of political regimes, kings, dictators, coups, and revolutionary masses; through the idealizing opaqueness of theologies of Islam or symbolic analyses of ritual. Lives that make narrative sense, that are not just sentimental soap operas, that do not tell us that people everywhere are the same'. (Fischer & Abedi, 1990, p. xix)

I began this review article by showing that while Said (1978) established the problematic relationship between knowledge and power in Western scholarship on Islam, he did not seek to address how Muslims might be represented after Orientalism. Indeed, I have argued that Said and other anti-essentialists often dissolve the significance of Islam for Muslims, producing a significant residual problem for contemporary Islamic studies. The main body of

the article then proceeded to examine how shifts between essence and silence have been played out in representations of Islam and Muslims at different moments in the short history of Anthropology. Until the early twentieth century Orientalists with expertise in Islamic texts also produced ethnography of the Middle East and beyond, the conditions of possibility for such work being enabled by colonial power. However, this tradition did not continue and, as Anthropology became formally established into the new century, functionalist ethnography showed limited interest in Muslims as Muslims from the 1920s to the 1960s.

Despite attempts elsewhere in the discipline to explore the relationship between the so-called Great and Little Traditions, for the most part a boundary was maintained between those interested in the textual legacy of medieval Islam and anthropologists concerned with local contexts that happened to be Muslim. However, since the late 1960s especially, there has been a reawakening of interest in theorising the relationship between the universality of Islam and the particularities of Muslim societies and cultures, not least in the work of key figures such as Geertz and Gellner. Yet, for all their fieldwork and divergent theoretical orientations, contemporary commentators influenced by postcolonial and postmodernist critiques have challenged both authors for producing generalising and dichotomised accounts which too often replay the essentialism of Orientalists and exhibit little interest in the everyday beliefs and practices of ordinary Muslims. At the other extreme, in their concern to acknowledge the plurality of social conditions in which Muslims live their lives, anthropologists such as Gilsenan and El-Zein would appear to have reduced Islam to an open signifier, dissolving its content and significance in ways similar to other anti-Orientalists such as Said.

However, since the 1970s and 1980s, more obviously interdisciplinary work, especially in American Anthropology, has begun to explore the ways in which the dominant textual tradition of Islam has been reproduced in regional contexts, shaping and authorising the construction of diverse yet recognisably Muslim identities, as well as being a resource for their contestation. More deserving of the label 'Anthropology of Islam' than much previous scholarship, I contend that such literature suggests a theoretical starting point for 'Muslim studies' which allows for the configuring power of social structure *and* the efficacy of history/tradition as Muslim habitus, *as well as* the contextual improvisations of human agents with diverse social positions and cultural capitals. Ultimately, my argument is that although this concern for structure, tradition and agency can be combined in different ways, attentiveness to both similarity and difference, continuity and change, suggests one way forward beyond the essence/ silence impasse in Orientalist/anti-Orientalist thinking about Muslim societies.

Of course, as Lindholm (2002, p. 124) maintains, 'too fervent embrace of the new textualism' should perhaps be resisted. Anthropology's traditional concern for holism, the

examination of aspects of social and cultural life only in relation to others remains an important corrective to decontextualised and normative paradigms that have dominated Islamic and Religious studies until recently.28 Attention to demotic as well as dominant discourses on Islam that do justice to relations of power in terms of gender, race and class is also key.[29] Moreover, locating the study of Islam in this way is of particular significance when, post-9/11, Muslims in Britain and beyond are routinely associated with fundamentalism and terrorism.[30] Reiterating the citation from Fischer and Abedi (1990) at the beginning of this conclusion, Varisco envisages a role for bottom-up, thick description in 'breaking the spells of representation' in dominant Western discourses about Islam and underscoring a 'common humanity' shared between Muslims and non-Muslims (2005, p. 20). However, he acknowledges that 'Ethnography is not a panacea for essentializing' (2005, p. 141). Indeed, there is still a need for scholars to evaluate more clearly what sorts of research processes and outcomes really do begin to make a difference in the face of powerful and competing state and media knowledges concerning Islam.

Finally, anthropologists of Islam would increasingly tend to agree with one of their number that 'it is almost nonsensical that an ethnographer would attempt to study Muslims without knowing [or, perhaps more realistically, knowing *of*] seminal texts like the Quran, *hadith* collections and relevant legal texts' (Varisco, 2005, p. 151). Nevertheless, few anthropologists are truly at home with the texts that Islamic studies scholars spend so long being trained to decipher. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the overall significance of developments in the Anthropology of Islam is rarely explored among Islamicists or Religionists in Britain or Europe, something evidenced by the silence of Siddiqui (2007) and El-Awaisi and Nye (2006) in this regard. Nevertheless, should the traditional centre of Islamic studies intend taking the study of the contemporary Muslim world seriously, the approaches and issues surveyed here should be of vital interest and concern. The twentieth century which saw Anthropology emerge as a university discipline was also the people's century with mass politics, education, the media and new public spaces transforming and fragmenting religious authority amongst ordinary Muslims like never before. Whether for its concern to describe the lived realities of this in richly textured ethnography or theorise the linkages between its global and local processes, the anthropological study of Islam and Muslims ought to find a place alongside more established approaches in any Islamic studies programme.

Notes

[1.] The review was commissioned by the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, Bill Rammell MP, who had expressed fears about 'extremism' on campus including exposure to radical ideas in the lecture hall. Responding to such suggestions, leading scholars in Arabic and Middle Eastern studies released a statement affirming the importance of full and free scholarly debate for intellectual development, thus resisting any

attempt at government interference or censorship of the curriculum (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 2007).

[2.] See, for example, his discussion of the Reay Committee Report of 1909, the Scarborough Committee Report of 1948 and the Hayter Committtee Report of 1961.

[3.] The utility of literature, film, drama and other forms of cultural production for the study of Muslim cultures and societies should not be underestimated. See, for example, Mahfouz's (1990) accounts of modern Egyptian life.

[4.] Like Eickelman's *The Middle East* and *Central Asia: an anthropological approach,* which is the best and perhaps only truly introductory account for the last quarter of a century and now in its fourth edition (1981; 1989; 1998; 2002), two fairly recent reviewers are also American (Starrett, 1997; Lindholm, 2002). So too is the author of a new text critical of the rhetoric of anthropological representations of Islam (Varisco, 2005). Starrett notes that during the 1980s the US Social Science Research Council established an interdisciplinary Committee for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies (1997, p. 283). Many of the best studies have been published in a University of California Press series, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies.

[5.] Until the early modern period the study of Islamic languages and texts in Western Europe was motivated mainly by Christian apology and polemic in the context of an expanding Muslim military threat (Daniel, 1993). However, as Maxime Rodinson (1988) explains, by the sixteenth century, the desire for knowledge about the East was growing, driven by the changing economic and political interests of Western states as navigation, trade and diplomacy increasingly extended beyond the Mediterranean. Once it became possible to print works in Arabic, scholars with access to one another's work were offered posts at Paris, Leiden, Cambridge and Oxford where the grammars and dictionaries essential to philological scholarship were developed. Moreover, as the rationalist and secular philosophy of Enlightenment universalism eventually took hold, Western scholars of the Orient were no longer bound to defend Christian theology (Rodinson, 1988, pp. 45ff.), though the linkages between scholarship and mission continued.

[6.] By the 1820s, the institutional foundations of a coherent academic project for the study of the Orient were being established as scholarly societies, many with their own journals, were established across Europe and in the United States (Rodinson, 1988, p. 56).

[7.] While the idea of Orientalism emphasised a commitment to scholarly specialisation, the huge task of translating and producing critical editions of manuscripts left Orientalists isolated from developments in other fields (Rodinson, 1988, p. 62). Yet, it was widely accepted that civilisations were unique cultural wholes whose underlying characteristics could properly be revealed only through the textual study of their origins. Moreover, a romanticised bourgeois fascination with literary and artistic representations of the exotic non-West had emerged in parallel with scholarly developments (Rodinson, 1988, p. 85).

[8.] For example, Said (1993, pp. xi–xiv, xxvii–xxxii) accounts for the success of resistance to colonialism, offers a critique of the chauvinism of some liberation movements,

acknowledges 'a new political conscience and intellectual conscience' in feminist studies of Islam and the Middle East, as well as identifying the intertwined histories of East and West.

[9.] The other main influence that Said cites is Antonio Gramsci (d. 1937), the Italian intellectual and activist. His notion of hegemony emphasises the way in which cultural domination operates through the ideological apparatus of consent rather than coercion, especially when the institutions of civil society, including the academy, are highly developed. According to Said, this accounts for the saturating durability and persistence of Orientalism (1978, pp. 11, 14). However, Gramsci is also clear that hegemonic relations are never final but always open to contestation, something that Said does not stress consistently.

[10.] Elsewhere, Asad (1993, p. 188) argues that the contestability of ethnographic texts by their subjects should be an important ethical and political consideration. For a review of nativist Islamic Anthropology, see Tapper (1995).

[11.] Werbner (2003, p. 301) maintains that such assertions are naive because fieldwork is inevitably a combination of positive and more conflictual experiences. Books are driven and judged by scholarly criteria which are at odds with most ordinary people's concerns.

[12.] Lane (d. 1876) wrote his famous (1836) account of urban Cairo as an accessory to his translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*, while among Burton's works is his account of pilgrimage to the Holy Places (1893).

[13.] Given Anthropology's relative lack of interest in Islam and Muslim societies until the 1960s, this legacy has proven especially significant.

[14.] Of course a number of native-speaking anthropologists have contributed to the Anthropology of Muslim societies. For example, Asad (1970), Abu Lughod (1986), Antoun (1989) and El Guindi (1999).

[15.] Notably, as one alternative to the Orientalist emphasis on difference, Turner (1991, p. 37) suggests an exploration of sameness, a common Jewish-Christian-Muslim history of shared frameworks and mutual colonisation.

[16.] Writing at the time of the collapse of Muslim Spain, Ibn Khaldun tracked the growth, maturity and decay of Maghrebian dynasties. See Dawood (2004) for a recent translation.

[17.] Gellner was notoriously outspoken and publicly and personally attacked Said in a review of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) in the *Times Literary Supplement* (19 February 1993).

[18.] Asad argues: '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' (1986, p. 3).

[19.] Notably, both Gellner and Geertz worked on Morocco, as have Geertz's students (for example, Eickelman and Rosen) and others since. This may be because of the tradition of detailed work going back to French colonial ethnography.

[20.] The following citation gives a good sense of Geertz's approach and style: 'They are an odd pair…But…they are in some enlarged sense of the word Islamic—they make an instructive

comparison. At once very alike and very different, they form a kind of commentary on one another's character. Their most obvious likeness is, as I say, their religious affiliation; but it is also, culturally speaking at least, their most obvious unlikeness. They stand at the eastern and western extremities of the narrow bend of classical Islamic civilisation…they have participated in the history of that civilisation in quite different ways, to quite different degrees, and with quite different results. They both incline toward Mecca, but, the antipodes of the Muslim world, they bow in opposite directions' (Geertz, 1968, p. 4).

[21.] Elsewhere Asad challenges Geertz for imagining that symbols possess a religious truth of their own independent of social conditions: 'How does (religious) power create (religious) truth?' (1993, p. 33). Geertz also emphasises the significance of meaning and religion as 'a general order of existence' which Asad sees as an especially modern, marginalised and privatised, Christian prioritising of individual belief as the only space allowed to Christianity by post- Enlightenment society.

[22.] El-Zein reviews the work of Geertz including (Geertz, 1968) as well as Gilsenan (1973), Eickelman (1976) and others.

[23.] In so doing, Asad challenges Eickelman (1981, p. 204) who approves the idea that Islam is perhaps best understood in terms of orthopraxy, an idea with roots in Smith (1957). For a defence, see Antoun (1989, p. 10).

[24.] Chapter 6 of *Genealogies of Religion* (Asad, 1993) on the orthodox tradition as an (albeit waning) basis for religious reasoning and criticism in contemporary Saudi Arabia is a rare example of such a contribution since 1986.

[25.] Bourdieu's (1977) work represents a Marxist concern for the determining effects of the social structure but also the situationality of cultural practices. It offers a corrective to the idea that social agents routinely make maximising choices regardless of the situation. However, while Bourdieu is insightful regarding why things stay the same, he does not account sufficiently for how things change.

[26.] On South East Asia, see also the work of Hefner (2000) on democratisation, pluralism and civil society.

[27.] To be fair to Lapidus (1988, p. 237) he does stress 'endlessly rich … possibilities' and 'an abiding ambiguity as to what constituted an Islamic society' as well as underlining the imprint of Middle Eastern origins. For an historical anthropology, see Lindholm (1996).

[28.] While Martin's (2001) volume on Islam and Religious studies evidences scholars moving beyond their traditional boundaries, even in their interest in Muslim lives, they remain focused on normative aspects of Islam.

[29.] For anthropological accounts of gender in Muslim societies see, for example, Abu Lughod (1986), Boddy (1989), Delaney (1991) and El Guindi (1999).

[30.] Anthropologists were amongst the first to study South Asian Muslim migrants in Britain though early studies, concerned mainly with Pakistani ethnicity, rarely discussed Islam at any length. Some studied women's domestic religious rituals and the sectarianism of

mosque politics (e.g. Shaw, 1988), but multidisciplinary interest in Muslims as Muslims mushroomed after the Rushdie Affair of 1989. Nevertheless, anthropologists remain amongst the most sophisticated commentators (see Werbner, 2002).

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