

THE STUDY OF ISLAM IN LOCAL CONTEXTS¹

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(Paper read on February 28, 1991, as the first of two obligatory lectures in defence of the Doctor of Philosophy-degree at the University of Bergen).

The empirical context for this talk is "local Islam." The topic may at first glance seem very fashionable indeed, and the current political context is of course the main reason; but on the other hand the topic may seem somewhat to be out of date. Anthropological research is to an increasing degree turning away from concepts like "local" and "locality" claiming it is the wider regional and global contexts, including the globalization of culture that counts. And a quick glance at the Muslim world may give the same impression. The wave of fundamentalism seems to be rolling over local communities, providing a ready-made, package-like interpretation of the world, informing action, however medieval it may seem. In these contexts anthropologists seem to be uncomfortable. We know too little about Islamic theology to know which particular place in the Holy Scripture is producing a certain effect. We also know too little about the Islamic past to tell which historical period a current event is reflecting. But at this very point we also find the starting point for our counter-offensive. Contemporary societies are reflecting neither holy scriptures nor earlier history. Such elements are certainly there as contributing factors, but so are contemporary politics and economics. Our task is to show how all these things come together to create peoples reality. And that is what my talk is about.

Some earlier analyses

A whole range of anthropological contributions can assist us in this search for understanding Islam. One position is that Islam is a heterogeneous collection of items, each of which belongs to Islam because local informants say so. Gilzenan's "Recognizing Islam" may serve as one example of this position, that Islam is what Muslims everywhere say it is, thus leading up to a world of many Islams. A second position is the one represented by Ernest Gellner, notably represented in his "Muslim Society." Islam is here depicted as a distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life. Social structure, religious belief and political activity go together to an extent that Islam becomes the blueprint of the social order. We know his descriptions of Islam in the Moroccan countryside, with segmentary tribes and the saint, marabout being the religious representative, to Islam of the town with institutions of

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