

# Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning

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Edited by  
WILLIAM R. ROFF

# Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning

COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF MUSLIM DISCOURSE

Edited by WILLIAM R. ROFF

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## Preface

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Earlier versions of most of the chapters in this book, together with some not appearing here, were prepared for a meeting held in New York City in May, 1984, sponsored by the Joint Committees on South Asia and on Southeast Asia of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. We should like to thank these committees for their hospitality and the committee on South Asia for its support of two earlier meetings in 1979 and 1983 which similarly set out to explore the 'indigenous conceptual systems' of Muslims.

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W.R.R.

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## Note on Transliteration

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Any book that draws on materials in six major Islamic languages — Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali, Malay, and Hausa, with some additional cognates such as Yoruba and Javanese — faces considerable problems of transliteration. The system employed here, with as much consistency as possible, has been to use for Arabic that given in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1972: Vol. 2, 182-84), with other letters added to represent non-Arabic sounds in Persian, Urdu and Malay. Diacritics have been omitted, except in the Glossary, where they are given in full.

Arabic-derived terms occurring in languages other than Arabic are spelled in the way common in those languages (*mallam* rather than *mu'allam*, for example). So are personal (and some proper) names, which are given in locally preferred rather than artificially Arabicized forms (Usuman dan Fodio, and Abdurrahman, for example, rather than 'Uthman ibn Fudi, and 'Abd al-Rahman).



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## Editor's Introduction

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The essays in this book seek to address one central question: How may we understand the nature, impulse, and dynamic of Muslim social and political action? More specifically, what are the relationships, direct or dialectical, between the prescriptions and requirements of Islamic belief, socially reproduced (of 'being Muslim', in short), and the economic, political, and social circumstances of the lives of actual Muslims? In trying to answer this question, the essays have as a shared premiss the assumption that 'what Muslims say' — and therefore the analysis of Muslim discourse about such matters — must have a central role in the enquiry.

In introducing the collection, however, which ranges very widely, from Nigeria and North Africa to Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, and Indonesia, and from the eighteenth century to the present, it might be as well to ask first a prior question. Why *should* we expect Muslims in such diverse contexts and from such different backgrounds to behave in ways shaped in any important, commonly identifiable fashion by an understanding of what it means to 'be Muslim', rather than, for example, by their shared peripheral relationship to the world capitalist order, by the demographics of rapid population increase, urban growth, and underemployment, or by statism and the rebirth-pangs of the post-colonial era? There can be little dispute that significant elements of a shared religious culture are in fact a feature of the social lives of Muslims from Dahomey to Doha and Dacca — among them, for example, a sacred text and set of symbols, a vocabulary of moral suasion, the practical knowledge associated with Islamic educational and juridical institutions, and the sodalities of the Sufi orders. It is therefore reasonable to enquire how elements of this shared culture, reproduced and given meaning anew in local terms from the Nejd to Nigeria, shape responses to (and are themselves shaped by) the harsh or subtle facts of political and economic life. How are the real or supposed imperatives of 'being Muslim' understood, and in what terms and by whom, and with what social implications are they expressed, conveyed, urged, argued, and acted upon?

Not all the contributors to this book would necessarily answer, or indeed address, these questions in the same way (and none, it must be emphasized, assumes a reified, essentialist 'Islam', divorced from real Muslims). What does distinguish them is a common recognition of the need to explore the reflexive relationships between Islamic

beliefs, ideas, ideologies, institutional forms, and prescriptive roles, socially reproduced by given groups of Muslims, and the political, economic, and other salient conditions under which these and other specifically situated Muslims live. It is this attempt to understand how Muslim 'discourses' about their lives are constituted, through the linking of symbolic or cultural analysis of what is said and done with analysis of the material and other conditions in which the saying and doing occur, that we intend when we refer to the 'political economy of meaning'. As Eickelman notes, in the essay that begins the book, an adequate political economy of meaning must rest on a proper balance between attention to the communication and development of complex systems of knowledge and practice, and the ways in which these systems inform and are informed by configurations of political domination and economic relations. Our primary aim has been to strive for and so far as possible to exemplify this balance, or at the very least to draw attention to the need for it and to the means of attaining it.

Listening to argument, then, and examining it as carefully as possible in context, is the principal intent of the essays presented here. What links them one with another (beyond the fact that they all deal with Muslims actively engaged in persuading Muslims) is less a theoretical perspective, despite our concern with the analysis of discourse, than a methodological and interpretative one. The essence of this perspective — contextual location of what Muslims say, with context denoting the archival repertoire of idea and sentiment available from within the Islamic tradition as well as actual socio-political circumstance — has already been indicated. Though what we mean by a 'discourse', namely the contextual written and spoken practice of given Muslims, has something in common with the current interest in the construction and deconstruction of discourses evidenced in many of the human and social sciences, we are more concerned to practise interpretation than to elaborate theory. It is sometimes argued that theory must precede practice, but if, as Paul Valéry is said to have remarked (and as much of Michel Foucault's writing implies), all theory is autobiography, it would be as curious to expect the practice of interpretation to be preceded by a theory of interpretation as to expect the lived life to be preceded by the examined life. The two must, indeed, proceed hand in hand, or perhaps more exactly dialectically, each informing and being informed by the other. It is recognition of this dialectical relationship between theory and action that prompts us, whatever our various individual 'theoretical' starting points, to turn our interpretative attention to the dialectic between prescription and circumstance in the lives of Muslim

social actors, and to the discourses which reflect this dialectic.

The essays have been arranged in three sections, each reflecting a different emphasis or approach. The first four, on 'The Political Economy of Religious Culture', are concerned for the most part to raise the methodological and interpretative questions that confront us when contemplating the rhetoric of Muslim social and political action. Two of these essays deal, as it happens, with societies represented elsewhere in the book, Indonesia and Nigeria. Though something might have been gained by adopting an area rubric, and placing all the essays dealing with particular countries together, this would have worked against our main purpose, which has precisely not been to produce yet another volume of area studies but to focus in a comparative way on certain kinds of discourse and the circumstances of their production. This intention is made more explicit in the second section of the book, 'Muslim Social Thought and the State', which contains four essays reflecting situations — in Iran, Pakistan, the Maghreb, and Southeast Asia — in which the state may be perceived as the prime determinant of the dominant discourse in society, to which all alternative groups must necessarily respond. In the final section of the book, 'Change and the Individual Voice', the essays look at how individual Muslims may respond to change in political and economic circumstances, how they may seek to bring change and its management into congruence with their Islamic beliefs, and how they speak of this to other Muslims.

In the first section, Eickelman's discussion of 'changing interpretations of Islamic movements' starts by noting the way in which Western social science, with a prevailing view of 'religion' as a separable and separate domain of social thought and action increasingly irrelevant to the public life of modern and modernising societies, has been forced to come to grips with much evidence to the contrary — quite generally, but not least among Muslims. Though a recognition, in principle, of the interconnectedness of religious systems and their material and social contexts has re-emerged, the complex relationships between political economy and systems of knowledge and belief have more often been assumed than explored. Eickelman suggests, however, that certain shifts in disciplinary emphasis in the past two decades, notably among and between anthropologists and social historians, have helped to redirect analytical attention to how cultures and systems of meaning are reproduced, to the social and practical contexts in which knowledge is made available for reproduction, and to the varieties and levels of Muslim expression and discourse that result. He notes three significant focuses of attention characterizing such

enquiries, all strongly present in the essays offered here; the historical specificity of change, the social scale of the community in which change occurs, and the internal social divisions reflected in the discourses that mark that change. It is the resulting debate within Muslim societies, he suggests, that, in conjunction with political and economic change, creates a continuous dialectic of self-renewal and social transformation.

In my own essay, 'Islamic movements: one or many?', I have emphasized the need to understand, within this debate, 'the intelligibility of Islamic imperatives for Muslims', and adopted an explicitly comparative approach. Arguing that Islamic precepts ('being Muslim') supply a major, sometimes determinative, part of the perceived objective conditions which direct or constrain social action, I examine the implications of such an assumption in the light of four of the so-called '*Wahhabi*' movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in Central Arabia, West Sumatra, Bengal, and northern Nigeria. Though it may be concluded that simplistic evocations of 'Wahhabism' dissolve upon close inspection, and with them the implied claims they make to a special sort of *a priori* inherent universalism, they draw fresh attention, in virtue of the very specificity of the discourses that accompanied these social perturbations, to the ways in which Muslims may find meaning in, or create it from, a commonly shared, Islamically supplied, repertoire of imperatives to personal and social action.

The remaining two essays in this section, by Hefner and Lubeck, though similarly concerned to develop general interpretative arguments, do so in the contrasting circumstances of two closely observed contemporary societies — the highlands of central Java, and northern Nigeria. Hefner's paper is one of three in this volume dealing with Indonesians, each of which examines a different level of experience and social action within the world's most populous Muslim state. What it means to be, or become, or become more of, a Muslim in the remote villages of the previously non-Muslim highland Tengger, in the hot-house political life of the capital's Islamic youth movements, or in the perceptions of a single, thoughtful intellectual, produces distinctively different kinds of discourse. While at the local level, as Hefner shows, being or becoming a Muslim may acquire a new salience as a result of political and economic change, the problems of being a politically and personally committed Muslim in a Jakarta dominated by a statist regime unsympathetic to Islamic aspirations, and in an increasingly secular modern Indonesia, produces, as we shall see in the essays by Hassan and Johns, somewhat different

kinds of argument and debate.

Hefner's discussion of the particular situation of the *Buda* people in Besuki, in addition to making a significant contribution to studies of 'Islamization' in Indonesia, raises important general questions concerning the nature of 'traditional' and 'world' religious systems, and the conversion or intensification process that leads people from the former to the latter. In studying this kind of transition, he suggests, we need to take into account the cultural content of the religious discourses of both systems in relation to the scale, political and economic organization, and cultural diversity of the communities to which each appeals, and seek to discover how social and ideational realities cohere to form manageable systems of meaning.

The increasing failure to provide shared meanings for one particular segment of Muslim society in northern Nigeria — certain of the *gardawa* or peripatetic Qur'anic students and their *mallam* (teachers) — and the expression of their resulting discontent in the violent protest movement, known as 'Yan Tatsine, is the subject of Lubeck's paper. Arguing that ideas take form as social movements only when social and material conditions are present to sustain, recruit, and reproduce materially and ideologically the required support, he outlines the transformations of the Nigerian economy and state from the Sokoto period to the present. Islamic and Qur'anic networks that had functioned to integrate rural and urban areas, and to provide a meaningful existence to their participants, were restructured somewhat during the colonial-capitalist and early independence years, but remained an integral feature of northern Nigerian social life until the petroleum boom of the 1970s. The boom led to rapid urban-industrial growth and huge disparities of wealth, produced levels of corruption that severely damaged the social fabric, disrupted the balance of rural-urban relations, and contributed to a sharp increase in the power of the state. Full understanding of the 'Yan Tatsine reaction to these developments is possible, Lubeck suggests, only if one gives due weight to both the structural features of change and their cultural dimensions as expressed in the Islamic discourse of the most militant followers of the movement, the marginalized *gardawa*.

Implicit in several of the essays in the first section is the importance of the state as a primary determinant of Islamic discourses, either directly or by reaction. The second section of the book takes up this issue more explicitly. It contains four essays, which may conveniently be thought of in pairs, though they have overlapping concerns. In the first two, based on contemporary Iran and Pakistan, the ability of the authoritarian 'Islamic' state to establish the dominant terms of

discourse is discussed, together with some of the consequences of this. In the second two, which relate to North Africa and Southeast Asia, primary attention is given to the 'Islamist' discourses (to use the now widely accepted French term) of social groups which are in certain ways at odds with state power, or forced to come to terms with it.

The revolution in Iran in 1979 has come to represent, for many in the world at large, the apparent political potency of aroused Islamic sentiment, and, as many of the papers in this volume testify (Vatin's on the Maghreb, for example, or Christelow's on Nigeria) it has indeed been a source of inspiration and enthusiasm for other Muslim communities. Arjomand's essay, 'Revolution in Shi'ism', however, demonstrates very clearly the specificity and particularity of the Iranian experience. As his title suggests, the revolution may be perceived as at least as much a revolution in Shi'i argument about the sovereignty of the *ulama* (*vilayat-e faqih*) as a revolution in the social order, though indeed the two are not wholly separable. The implications of this dual revolution, for society and Islamic institutions alike, remain to be worked out.

Metcalf, writing about 'Islamic arguments in contemporary Pakistan', is likewise concerned with a state that is undertaking wholesale 'islamization' of society, though in this instance through the agency of a military autocracy rather than a scholarly hierarchy. Tracing the development of views about the proper relationship between 'Islam and the state' from the foundation of Pakistan as 'a homeland for Muslims' in 1946 to the proclamation of the *nizam-i mustafa* ('system of the Prophet') by the Zia regime in 1977, she notes the relatively indirect role played throughout by *ulama*. Notwithstanding this, the ideas of the Jama'at-i Islam (an organization now formally banned, with all other political parties) and its founder Maududi underlie much of the activity of the present regime, which uses the institutions and resources of the state to alter or enact statute law to express the *shari'a*, and to promote social criticism of 'non-Muslim' life styles. The official discourse that results, with its twin emphases on the enactment of positive law and the state-sponsored islamization of social life, has resulted in, among other things, considerable argument about the position of women in society. Using this argument, and its various protagonists, as a lens through which to examine the larger process, Metcalf concludes that while islamization 'from the top down' plays a manifest role in preserving existing structures of society and maintaining an authoritarian regime in power, the ideology accompanying it is intensely appealing to certain segments of the population and must be understood in its own terms.

Social criticism of a kind familiar in both Iran and Pakistan — in particular, expressed discontent with Western-inspired forms in public and private life — is a marked feature of the Islamist movements discussed by Vatin, in his essay 'Seduction and sedition: Islamic polemical discourses in the Maghreb'. Quoting Maxime Rodinson's remark that it is hard to see the difference between those who seek power in order to apply Islam and those who use Islam to accede to power, Vatin examines two 'traditional-type' movements, one in contemporary Morocco and the other in Tunisia, which criticize the state and its social role while seeking to offer alternative visions of the ideal Islamic society, and then compares these with other, more 'progressive' movements there and in Algeria. In an essay of great richness of texture, in its account of the discourses recorded and the social bases of the groups espousing them, Vatin argues that the 'delegitimization' of the post-colonial state, as a result of its inability in the course of modernization to satisfy either the material or the moral demands of a large number of its members, has led both to state attempts to appropriate Islamic symbols and institutions in order to regain control over civil society, and to a wide range of Islamist claims to knowledge of competing systems that would better serve God and the needs of the Islamic *umma*. The result, in Vatin's terms, is an extensive interpenetration of the domains of religious and political discourse that reflects real divisions within Maghrebi society but has yet to provide any satisfactory reworking of the image of 'the Islamic city'.

Though the contest may not be as sharp in the major Islamic societies of Southeast Asia, it none the less lies at the heart of the politics described by Hassan, in his essay on 'The response of Muslim youth organizations to political change: *HMI* in Indonesia and *ABIM* in Malaysia'. Despite many elements of a shared indigenous culture and a not altogether dissimilar colonial past, the Indonesian and Malaysian states have adopted strikingly different attitudes to recent Islamic and islamizing movements. The authoritarian military regime in Indonesia, a country in which 90 per cent of the population of 165 million declares itself to be Muslim, has since the early 1970s sought to depoliticize Islam and elevate to ideological primacy the statist doctrine known as *Pančasila*. Malaysia, a parliamentary democracy with a very large non-Muslim minority (nearly half of the population of 15 million), has during the same period sought for the most part to accommodate, and increasingly to co-opt, the rather broad range of movements that respond to the *da'wa* (call) of Islamic revitalization. In Indonesia, Hassan notes, the response of the important group



of young Muslim intellectuals, HMI, has moved from initial acceptance of the secular modernizing state, combined with personal commitment to a 'renewed' (and modernized) Islamic faith, to a more holistic (and potentially more political) view of Islam as a complete way of life that must make demands upon the state apparatus. In Malaysia, by contrast, the corresponding shift in stance and discourse exemplified by the ABIM youth movement has been in the opposite direction relative to the state, from a largely rejectionist *da'wa* to a more pragmatic effort to attain the substance of social reform in Islamic directions, with the state itself (and the Malay nationalism that underlies it) seemingly prepared to accommodate such pressures and to adopt Islamic symbols and forms of discourse.

The three essays in the final section of the book shift the focus somewhat, from states and movements to individual actors, and to some of the ways in which individual Muslims — preachers and propagandists, judges and journalists — have sought from within the Islamic tradition to argue the need for change and renewal.

Gaffney, in 'Authority and the mosque in Upper Egypt: the Islamic preacher as image and actor', places at the center of his essay the social arena which is a locus for a major part of all Islamic discourses, the mosque of general assembly. Taking as his starting point two contrasting preachers — a traditional, Azhar-trained scholar in a long-established, state-funded mosque associated with the *baraka* (blessing) of a notable saint, and a layman in an independent mosque founded and supported by a local social welfare association — he examines the construction of their respective Friday *khutbas* (sermons). Each employs a common, indeed shared, flexible repertory of symbols invested with meaning at different levels of social and cultural reference. In their separate ways, and with contrasting rhetorical styles, they unite, says Gaffney, 'communities of ritual' with 'communities of action', representing in their persons an exemplary unity of image and actor, at once the symbolic articulators of fixed and sacred ideas and, by virtue of their own mundane roles in society, models for ordinary conduct in a changing human world. Their efficacy as leaders depends, Gaffney suggests, on their capacity to maintain the dialectic inherent in and crucial to this double role.

Allan Christelow, writing about the northern Nigeria whose underclass has already been described in Lubeck's discussion of the 'Yan Tatsine movement, supplies a careful delineation of three individual spokesmen for different Islamic tendencies among the elite. To give voice to their views and to address the Nigerian umma all three employ the modern media, especially the weekend press and the radio. They