Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation

Daniel Martin Varisco
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Daniel Martin Varisco's *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation* provides a very sound and well-informed literary critique of Clifford Geertz's *Islam Observed* (1968), Ernest Gellner's *Muslim Society* (1981), Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* (1975), and Akbar Ahmed's *Discovering Islam* (1988). The author, an experienced ethnographer of Middle Eastern societies, examines the treatments and representations of Islam in these seminal texts. After presenting his topic and background in the introduction, he demonstrates how these four authors obscured, misrepresented, and elided the everyday lives of Muslims. In the epilogue, Varisco gleans some important lessons for the study of Islam from his entertaining and witty exploration of these social science texts.

In the book's introduction, the author briefly discusses the intellectual history of anthropology and ethnographic studies of Muslims. He notes that the discipline of anthropology has encountered numerous problems, including its recognition of Victorian traveler's reports, Spencerian "evolutionism," and the postcolonial critique of Eurocentric textual representations of non-western others. Addressing the current state of anthropological theory, Varisco mentions the blurring of boundaries between established disciplines as well as the particularly American problem over whether to maintain the four-field approach of holistically studying human beings.

In keeping with this Eurocentric slant toward "primitives," he observes that there were very few ethnographic studies of Muslims, except Evans-Pritchard's 1940s work on Cyrenaican Bedouins and those by others following his example, until ethnographers began to produce Robert Redfield-influenced community studies. Yet many of these latter studies were done by researchers who, with little proficiency in Arabic, wrote from a distance and thus barely penetrated the surface of Islam in local Muslims' lives. Varisco

describes the main thread of ethnographic studies of Muslims, from Evans-Pritchard to Gellner, Geertz, and his students I. M. Lewis and Michael Gilsenen, as concentrating on Islamic mysticism: "Once again, it seems as though anthropology came to Islam via the exotic, as though the mundane was too obvious, perhaps too boring, to require explanation" (p. 17).

Chapter 1, "Clifford Geertz: Islam Observed Again," argues that Geertz's seminal text on Islam, contrary to its claims, is "neither scientific nor ethnographic" (p. 29) due to its profound lack of any analysis of primary texts, contextual depth, and cultural thickness. Moreover, Varisco asserts that the ethnographic data is peculiarly absent: "What we get is Geertz's read; the only natives in sight are those viewed generically through the lens of the absent ethnographer's own highly crafted rhetoric. Flesh-and-blood Muslims are obscured, visible only through cleverly contrived representation and esssentialized types" (p. 29). Varisco proceeds to locate the epistemological bases of Geertz's misunderstanding of Islam in his reliance upon Weber's model of ideal types and his own "symbol"-ridden definition of religion, which displaces society, economics, and politics. Moreover, the author states that Geertz's representation of Islam emphasizes his "models for" conception of religion as a cultural subsystem. In closing this chapter, Varisco returns to the critical issue of the absence of Muslims being observed and spoken to in their local contexts in this book, a matter that is central to any significant contribution of anthropology.

Chapter 2, "Ernest Gellner: Idealized to a Fault," argues that Gellner constructs an idealized North African society from his reading of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*. Varisco notes: "The problem with Gellner's idealization is that it fits neither the description of dynastic change given by Ibn Khaldun nor the historical and ethnographic evidence for North Africa" (p. 65). The author demonstrates that Gellner attempted to twist the works of Hume, as he did that of Ibn Khaldun, by turning his philosophical projections into a sociological construal of religion, and that Gellner formulates an "ahistorical trajectory … for the origins of Islam" (p. 75). Similar to Geertz, Gellner inscribes an "intellectualized and essentialized 'monolithic conception of Islam'" (p. 76) from which we never learn what Islam means in the lives of ordinary Muslims. Moreover, Varisco observes that Gellner also conducted ethnographic fieldwork, thereby providing his abstract explanations with the dubious authoritative voice of having been "there" among some "tribal" Arabs and Berbers in Morocco.

In chapter 3, "Beyond the Veil: At Play in the Bed of the Prophet," he focuses on the rhetoric surrounding Prophet Muhammad as a model for con-

structing "Muslim" gender roles. First he examines the negative Orientalist discourse of William Muir and Nabia Abbott and the positive Muslim viewpoints of Bint al-Shati' and Muhammad Haykel before arriving at Fatima Mernissi's discourse, which is "filtered through the debates and discursive turns that have engaged Orientalists and believers for several centuries" (p. 83). Varisco examines her core argument that "Muslim social structure" is organized against the "disruptive power of female sexuality" (quoted on p. 94). Although the Arabic term *fitnah* is related to female nature throughout Mernissi's text, Varisco notes that none of the over thirty references to *fitnah* in the Qur'an refers to women. Glossing *fitnah* as "chaos and disorder," however, Mernissi cites a tradition of Prophet Muhammad to support her gendered interpretation. The author criticizes Mernissi's tack of aiming her claims beyond the bounds of local Moroccan views of Islam or female sexuality to inscribe generalized images of "Muslim Society" and even "Islam" (p. 96): "Islam is reified in a take-it-or-leave-it sense that fits squarely with the age-old preconceptions Westerners have about Islam and grates to the core a large majority of Muslims, female as well as male" (p. 97).

In chapter 4, "Akbar Ahmed: Discovering Islam Inside Out," Varisco extricates Ahmed's representation of Islam and the logic of his rhetoric as an "avowedly Muslim anthropologist" (p. 117): "Ahmed's discovery approach consciously idealizes Islam," appropriating Weber's concept of "ideal or pure types" to define the "essence" of Islam (p. 121). Varisco critiques the way in which Ahmed uses his core beliefs as a Muslim in the Qur'an and Sunnah and the ideal aim of Paradise in the Afterlife as a framework for understanding and assessing the behavior of Muslims. Varisco rejects this prescriptive viewpoint as properly social scientific: "The Quran and information about Muhammad are textual sources that must be interpreted; it is the way in which the texts are acted upon that must inform a sociological or anthropological model of the religion" (p. 121).

Varisco ends this insightful literary critique with an epilogue that analyzes the distinctive characteristics of a sounder anthropology of Islam, major challenges to successful ethnographic fieldwork, and approaches to studying Islam in its local contexts as well as in its great texts. This short but potent exploration of anthropological representations of Islam makes an important contribution to ethnographic studies, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, and religious studies.

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