Chapter 10
Integrity and Commitment in the Anthropology of Islam

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Introduction

The anthropology of Islam remains a contested project.[1] Despite decades of substantial anthropological work on Islamic contexts and institutions, a concern abides over the possibility, even the probity of erecting 'Islam' as a category of comparative anthropological analysis. Given the diversity of often competing and conflicting discourses and practices claimed to be Islamic, and the difficulty of separating out 'the Islamic' from the rest of the complex skein of social and cultural life in any given context, it might seem, as Abdul Hamid el-Zein argued in his classic and formative discussion, anthropologically unjustifiable to define 'an isolable and bounded domain of meaningful phenomena' as Islamic. That would force the anthropologist into predicating a 'single, real Islam', albeit one anthropological interests might favour dividing into 'folk' or 'local' versions as against 'elite' visions, which are the preserve of the Orientalist and, more challengingly, 'the theologian'. 'Islam' as a category of anthropological analysis would be, on this reading, fundamentally incoherent (1977: 227, 241, 246, 249, 252). This concern was dismissed out of hand by Talal Asad (1986: 1–2), who proposed philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of a tradition, from which moral argument takes meaning and within which continuity and change can be argued for, and which has a past and a future, as a useful way of organising analysis in this domain (ibid.: 14ff.). This suggestion has indeed proved helpful (Zaman 2002: 4–7). But, as several scholars have pointed out,[2] it hardly serves as an answer to Zein's

[1] For recent discussions see e.g. Varisco (2005) and Marranci (2008).

[2] E.g. Lukens-Bull (1999: 5), Robbins (2003: 194), Varisco (2005: 146–47).

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challenge: the question would still remain as to what should be considered as falling within and without the tradition. Asad simply restates the problem, but in yet more acute form by noting that this process of inclusion and exclusion, the creation of 'orthodoxy', is a relation of power (1986: 15–17). But the anthropologist may still feel chary of being forced into exercising that power themselves. Whatever else anthropology's business is, this is surely not it.

This particular problem may remain unresolved, but these concerns have not stopped anthropologists from pursuing research into Islamic discourses, institutions and practices, or, as some would no doubt prefer to conceive it, into Muslim lives.[3] Indeed in this sense the anthropology of Islam seems in an enviable state of health (Robbins 2003: 191–92). The theoretical challenge posed by Zein has been sidestepped: never mind the anthropology of Islam, look to the ethnography, would seem the axiom on which much of this activity is founded (e.g. Varisco 2005: 146ff.). That is, the best antidote to concerns over generalising categories is rich and exact description of actually existing social contexts. As Robbins (2003: 193) observes, this is a familiar dynamic within wider socio-cultural anthropology, which has built its distinctive academic brand on the two pillars of extreme generalisation as the putative science of humanity and the extreme particularity of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. From the intrinsic tension between the two comes much of what is most interesting and valuable in anthropological theorising. In debates over the anthropology of Islam, as commonly elsewhere within the discipline, it is more often the anthropology – the overarching comparison – that is seen as problematic and ethnography that becomes the uncomplicated term.

My argument here will flow in the opposite direction: the ethnography of Islam poses at least as many if not more problems than the subsequent comparative analysis of its data. Indeed, to go further, there is a powerful sense in which the objections raised to that comparative analysis would be better seen as arising from the fieldwork process that precedes it. That is because anthropological fieldwork requires, engages with and creates commitments. Islam is itself at root (if not always in flower) a commitment, to God and to the message brought by God's prophet Muhammad.[4] Practising anthropology, 'one of the few genuine vocations' (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 55), entails its own commitments, if not, I should say, of the same order as those of Islam. Nevertheless, as in Islam, so in anthropology one finds strong positions on what counts as right belief and practice and what does not.

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[3] That is, one could argue we would do better to realise that an abstract 'Islam' cannot be studied anthropologically (i.e. ethnographically), only actually existing Muslims can (see e.g. Varisco 2005: 47, 143, passim). My own personal feeling is that to reduce the complex lives of over a billion people to one defining commitment (being Muslim) seems a more real and violent essentialisation than to take an ideal as one's anthropological object. Far from everything that Muslims say and do has anything much to do with Islam, pious claims to the contrary notwithstanding. To think in terms of 'Muslim societies', another possible empiricist manoeuvre, seems problematic on similar grounds: 'Muslim society' is in itself an ideal and not an empirical category.

[4] Cf. Lukens-Bull (1999: 10).

Ethnography, conducted through fieldwork, is ineluctable. Canonical – 'archetypal', 'Malinowskian' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 11) – fieldwork is long, intense and intimate. The paradigmatic mode of this anthropological mission is not the interview or the survey but participant observation, the anthropologist sharing their subjects' lives and activities. And yet 'participant observation' needs differentiation, and an interest in Islam raises distinctive, if not unique, issues in this regard, as Ronald Lukens-Bull (2007) has strikingly described. Participation in religious practice, which I focus on here, can be seen as an index of religious identity and commitment, in itself a commitment that the largely secular, not to say atheist anthropological tradition is not well equipped to accommodate (Ewing 1994). Further, as in the case of Christianity (Robbins 2003: 192–3), Islam's universal address makes it hard to bracket off a compartmentalised ethnographic space within which such participation could be confined. Notions of personal integrity formally shared between Muslims, Christians, liberal atheists and anthropologists of whichever stripe, demand a unity of commitments through time and space.[5] And because Islamic practice is commitment oriented, the core professional commitment to participant observation renders maintaining such unity when studying Islam anthropologically especially challenging, albeit not uniquely so.[6]

There is no one standard of ethnographic practice here: such relationships are open to negotiation. To pick up the threads of the canonical debates over the anthropology of Islam, I thus further wish to argue that the diversity and contestability of Islamic discourse and practice are fundamentally problematic not so much as an insuperable obstacle to comparative anthropological analysis, but because, on the ground, they entail a multiplicity of engagements on different, and potentially conflicting terms. In addition to a basic tension inherent in participant observation of religiously committed practice, then, further tensions may arise between the ramifying commitments of different inflections of a religious tradition. I draw on my own fieldwork among Sunni and (Twelver) Shi'i Muslim communities in Lebanon in 2007–2008, which seeks to document the social life of the sharia ('Islamic law') and entails work in a variety of explicitly 'Islamic' contexts, including Lebanon's sharia (family law) courts, the offices of major religious authorities, mosques and Sufi circles.[7] Here, like Lukens-Bull (2007: 182–85), I concentrate on the basic,

[5] This claim would bear further argument. Such concerns, while shared in the contexts I am describing, might in a broader frame look more particular. See, for instance, McIntosh's contrast of (in her terms) Giriama and Swahili ideologies in coastal Kenya, where the latter depend on the sorts of notions of moral personhood I am dealing with here, for which McIntosh claims 'Abrahamic' roots (2009: 25, 149–50, 183–90). Exclusive belief-commitment may also be less central a concern within traditions with a differently inflected focus on 'techniques of the self'. See, for instance, Laidlaw's (2002) use of Jainism to explore the possibility of an anthropology of ethics less myopically intent on legalistic notions of moral conduct.

[6] Lukens-Bull (2007) provides some useful comparative cases from elsewhere within the discipline.

[7] This was for 3 months in 2007 and 6 months in 2008. The field sites for 2007–2008 are described in more detail below. I also carried out fieldwork in Lebanon in 2003–2004 (about 12 months in total including two spent continuously visiting from neighbouring Damascus), on which see Clarke (2009).

but crucial question of participation in devotional practice, especially prayer: in some contexts this was welcomed, even demanded of me, in others discouraged. Because prayer can be seen as an affirmation of a commitment to Islam, and because I am not a Muslim, this became an issue of some moment, for myself and for others. Archetypal fieldwork seemed problematic at best.[8]

Relocating Zein's challenge within this domain of ethnographic practice and commitment offers, I think, a fresh perspective on it, if not easy answers.[9] To be sure, if we take seriously the notion that Islam is a transcendent ideal then there can be no solution to Zein's problem. In point of principle, no earthly authority, not even 'the theologian', can wholly grasp God's will. Indeed I myself chiefly work with precisely these 'theologians' of the anthropological discourse on Islam – religious specialist scholars and practitioners of the urban Middle East – but they are not always sure of the 'single, real Islam' themselves, let alone that their colleagues have the answer and certainly not their peers working within rival schools and other 'sects'. And yet, if one refuses to admit such transcendence, there is no logical reason why one could not draw lines, boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, to define what does and does not fall within the tradition, even arbitrary ones. If, as an anthropologist, one felt bound to defer to the Orientalist or theologian in this respect, then one could. If that means choosing one authority over others to 'define Islam', then one could do so. And there is no shortage of unthinking commentators who effectively do just that. But anthropologists do not want to. That is because they are bound by their commitments to those they work with, and, by extension, to others like them. They want to 'recognize' them, in Gilsenan's (1982) apt phrase and admirable example. Asad (1986: 2) was surely too quick to

[8] Of course, this is a particular perspective. Many, perhaps now even most, anthropologists of Islam are themselves, in different senses and in different ways, Muslims, for whom this particular issue would be very differently posed. But that is not to say that it would not be posed. I return to this question below.

[9] My focus on commitment might be seen as reductive: not all Muslims are committed Muslims. No doubt I am influenced by my principal subjects, religious specialists who have chosen Islam as a vocation and a profession and who, I must emphasise, see themselves as an embattled minority. I should stress that I do not hold that the anthropology of Islam should be confined to such studies. But I am also influenced by debates over the nature of the contemporary anthropological vocation. One influential way of coping with the challenge of constructing 'ethnography in/of the contemporary world system' (Marcus 1995) has been to see 'the field' as less a geographical expression than a political one, and anthropological knowledge as 'a form of situated intervention . . . a way of pursuing specific political aims while simultaneously seeking lines of common political purpose with allies who stand elsewhere' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 35, 38–39). That sets a daunting standard for entry into parts of the world like the Middle East, which have seen rather too much intervention of late and a virtuoso understanding of whose political complexities might be better seen as a goal rather than precondition of fieldwork. The contemporary anthropological vocation does have to be re-imagined within the current landscape of connectivity, and such commitments are one way of exploring that. But, as I will argue here, ethnographic commitments can and do extend beyond mundane politics and maintaining anthropological integrity is a more complex and challenging matter than just taking sides.

dismiss such recognition as a 'paradox' because it may entail the simultaneous recognition of conflicting positions (as to what 'true Islam' is, for instance).[10] Logic is not the issue: ethnographic commitments are. This is neither to dissolve Zein's problem, nor to make it any easier to bear: pangs of conscience over conflicting commitments to people, whether real hosts and collaborators or imagined audiences, are more painful than the pricks of paradox. But it does remind us why we are obliged to persevere, Zein's pessimism notwithstanding. Commitments must be honoured, or at the very least, acknowledged.

Fieldwork in Lebanon, 2007–2008

Lebanon was enduring difficult times in 2007–2008. The war with Israel in 2006, triggered by Hezbollah's capture of Israeli military personnel, had left much of the country's infrastructure damaged and devastated the southern suburbs of Beirut. It had also deepened the divide in the country between the governing March 14 coalition, led by Sunni politician Sa'd al-Hariri, and the March 8 opposition movement led by the Shi'i Hezbollah, a divide with ominous sectarian possibilities.[11] The machinery of government was paralysed by an opposition boycott and sit-in, and by a series of car-bomb assassinations widely perceived as related to Syrian regime concerns over the proposed United Nations investigation into the 2005 assassination of premier Rafiq al-Hariri, Sa'd's father. These internal tensions and conflicts were exacerbated by the disastrous regional and international situation subsequent to the US-led 'war on terror', widely perceived as a war on Islam, and the invasion of Iraq. My presence was thus a highly marked and no doubt more than occasionally worrying one in my field sites, although the success I had is a tribute to the generosity, openness and moral courage of those who helped me.

There was a seeming huge disproportion in scale between my academic project and its perceived significance. My investigations into sharia discourse in Lebanon were not of the potentially world historical, even cosmic import they were commonly attributed, flattering though that attribution might have been, not only to me, but also, with the greatest of respect, my informants. But nevertheless my research was often described as of the very highest moment: 'dangerous' but also 'important', it was firmly situated within the wider struggle, one in which God Himself would reveal His wider purpose. If I could only understand the truth about Islam, even just at the very most basic level that 'it is not terrorism', and communicate that message in Britain and in the West, then I would be performing a vital function. I for my part expressed my own, wholly sincere wish to contribute to such 'mutual understanding'

[10] For another defence of Gilsenan see Lukens-Bull (1999: 5).

[11] Somewhat diminished, it should be said, by the participation of the largely Christian following of General Michel Aoun in the March 8 alliance, offsetting the Christian Lebanese Forces' membership of March 14.

(*tafāhum*). There was thus a quasi-diplomatic cast to my work, which sometimes extended to invitations to official events: I became versed in the niceties of courteous, if occasionally banal conversation with religious dignitaries; and I took due care over my appearance, a point of considerable local interest.

My presence in the sharia courts was relatively uncontroversial. The Sunni and Shiʻi initial courts where I did most of my work are more or less simple offices.[12] One judge and a recorder sit behind a desk and the plaintiff and respondent stand in front of it; some easy chairs line the room for other attendees (such as the ethnographer). There is little to mark this as a 'religious' environment, beyond the occasional piece of calligraphy on the wall, a pertinent Quranic verse perhaps. More striking is the apparel of the judge, who should wear his full religious regalia, his turban and robes, the Sunni and Shiʻi versions being somewhat different; and women are required to wear some form of *hijāb*, often just a cloth draped over their heads. The sharia courts follow a law of procedure modelled on civil court principles and the sessions are conceived as public: 'We could not stop you attending even if we wanted to!', as I was frequently told, with some exaggeration no doubt. I had the permission of the judges I worked with, and some were more tolerant of my repeated presence than others. My role was as an observer: I could attend sessions (*jalsāt*) in order to see how Islamic law worked in practice; I was to record what I saw accurately, only withholding the names of parties to these cases; where I had failed to understand something, I could ask the judge for clarification. I could also turn to one of the lawyers working in the courts: trained in the civil legal tradition, several were prominent advocates for reform of the sharia courts and Lebanese 'communitarianism' more broadly, and saw me, rightly, as a natural secularist and thus a potential ally. Relations between them and the shaykhly judges could thus occasionally be strained.[13]

'Just tell the truth. We don't ask for more than that,' the then head of the Sunni courts, Shaykh Muhammad Kanaʻan told me when I first embarked on this path. The concerns of postmodern critique notwithstanding, objectivity was thus the intellectual, anthropological and political space where we could meet. My going to both Sunni and Shiʻi courts was a sign of my commitment to that objectivity, and my neutrality at a time of elevated sectarian tension. I would occasionally be drawn into the action: one of the parties to a case, or one of their companions, might suddenly appeal to me, taking me for a functionary of the court, or perhaps a knowledgeable lawyer, dressed as I was in shirt and jacket and taking notes. If a

[12] As opposed to the appeals courts, that is, which sit in much grander courtrooms. For more on my ethnography of Lebanon's sharia courts see Clarke (2012).

[13] Again, these courts are restricted to the sphere of family law. Christian courts provide a parallel function for Lebanon's numerous Christian communities. There is no civil marriage law, and one cannot marry, divorce, or perform any other family legal procedure without going through one of these religious tribunals. They reproduce religious identity automatically, and are thus a focus for critique on the part of civil society activists, who see such institutions as underpinning Lebanon's communitarian legal and political system and thus, they would argue, its periodic sectarian tensions.

case involved a foreign jurisdiction, as it very commonly would, the judge might rhetorically call on me to confirm a point as to British law or European social mores. Whenever an egregious instance occurred of the maltreatment of a wife by a husband or, conversely, a shining example of the kindness of the sharia to women, the judge might call my attention to it, inviting me to note either the distance of society from the teachings of Islam or the wisdom of the divine lawgiver. I did not have the opportunity that Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1993) did to act as judge's recorder, for example (probably for the best). I could at least occasionally point people to the right office when they were wandering lost in the corridor. But it was observation, more than participation, that was my primary function, and this positioning was reproduced in many of the other settings in which I worked, as in the offices of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (d. 2010), for instance, then perhaps Lebanon's leading (Shiʿi) religious personality (see Clarke 2010: 357–67).

Participant Observation of Devotional Practice

As part of my interest in Fadlallah's work, I wanted to attend the Friday sermons he delivered in the capacious al-Imamayn al-Hasanayn mosque in Beirut's southern suburbs. Fadlallah was a prominent and outspoken political commentator as well as religious authority, and these sermons were notable political events in their own right. The sermons were broadcast on radio and television, and were (and still are) also available on the ayatollah's website (www.bayynat.org.lb), but I was keen to attend in person for my own anthropological motives. Watching it on TV was not the same as being there. That wish was seen as wholly comprehensible and legitimate by the ayatollah's staff, but a problem loomed. Friday prayers in the packed mosque started immediately subsequent to the sermon. Were I to attempt to rush out at that moment, I was advised, especially were I to be anywhere close enough to get a decent view, 'people would find it unacceptable'. One solution might be for me to sit with the security guards in their booth at the gate, watching the sermon on television. I was not keen. Would I mind going through the motions with everyone else, then? I was naturally delighted at the prospect of being so closely engaged in mosque practice, but I wanted to know if this was ethically sound: would this not be hypocrisy (*nifāq*)?[14] Of course not, my advisor, a highly placed clerical member of the ayatollah's staff told me. This was a personal matter.

[14] 'Hypocrisy', it should be noted, has particular, deeply negative connotations within Islamic discourse. In the context of the master discourse of the Quran, it refers to the wavering loyalty of some of the early converts to Islam, 'the hypocrites' (*al-munāfiqīn*), on whom Muhammad could not rely during crucial episodes in the formative history of the Islamic community. These might thus be better thought of as 'dissenters' or even 'apostates' (Brockett 1993). But in the context of my conversations in Lebanon, it had the familiar meaning expressed by the Quranic verse (3: 167), 'they say with their mouths what is not in their hearts'. On the question of its applicability to non-Muslims participating in Muslim prayer, see also Lukens-Bull (2007: 185).

After all, he himself regularly attended interfaith meetings at Christian venues, and would participate in prayers, following their motions, if not repeating their exact words, as that would indeed be unbelief (*kufr*).[15] And so I became a regular attendee at these sermons and the subsequent prayers, frequently accompanied by a member of the ayatollah's staff who I could quiz as to what was going on around me and who would guarantee the legitimacy of my presence. As I had hoped, my participation in the activities in the mosque gave me insights that would have otherwise been denied me,[16] and my presence among the thousands of worshippers seemed not to inconvenience anyone, save through my occasional blunders in mosque etiquette.

Here then I remained an observer, but more of a participant one. But such a devotional setting allows different sets of themes, relationships and projects to be invoked and actualised. One of my closest and most productive relationships throughout my fieldwork was with a young (late twenties at that time) and dynamic Sunni shaykh, at the beginning of what promised to be a successful career. He worked as assistant to a judge in the courts, and was a generous host to me at his family apartment. He was also imam of a well-known West Beirut mosque, and delivered weekly lessons on Saturday nights to the congregation at which I was a regular attendee. These sorts of events are most conveniently held after work in the evening, for most of the year between the sunset (*maghrib*) and evening (*'ishā'*) prayers. I was encouraged by my young friend to arrive in good time so I could hang out with him and the lads (*shabāb*), and to wait for his departure after leading the evening prayers so that we could walk the streets together and chat. I would thus regularly attend both sets of prayers. But again the question arose, as a non-Muslim, what should I do? Although my friend emphasised that the decision was ultimately mine, we both came to feel that I should sit at the back during prayers, as a non-involved spectator. To participate might be to mislead others as to my identity and intention in this very public but relatively intimate space, with a regular congregation of a hundred rather than thousands. The attendees, and especially the latecomers rushing in past me, gave me quizzical looks and I naturally felt uncomfortable, marked out in this way. Nevertheless, despite occasional discomfort, this mode of ethnographic practice seemed to work. But a different dynamic had now been created. My attendance came to extend to months, then years. Was I always going to sit apart? Or was I eventually going to join in? A teleological framework naturally fell into place that was different from that for my work in the courts. There, people did begin to start wondering when they would be rid of me,

[15] I.e. it was not here assumed that I would also be repeating the verbal phrases exactly. To forestall a sectarian reading, this is not a specifically 'Shi'i' discourse. Such interfaith settings are attended by Sunni as well as Shi'i clerics. And the problem of my attending the Friday sermon and this solution was also one I encountered in Sunni settings. Nevertheless, it is true to say that I found myself less often the object of *da'wa* – being 'called' to Islam – in Shi'i contexts than Sunni ones, although I have no ready explanation for that.

[16] For example, into the extent to which Fadlallah's own highly rationalised brand of religiosity penetrated into everyday lay practice: that is, the ways in which such modernism could be 'enchanted' (Deeb 2006).

when I would 'have enough', enough, that is, to write up a satisfactorily complete study. But in the mosque, a different sort of end game became imaginable, one where my ever-increasing knowledge led me to become a Muslim; and I was subject to a continuous bombardment of well-meaning questions and exhortations in this regard. Failure in this context meant not producing a disappointingly thin ethnography but an eternity suffering the torments of hell fire, as graphically described in my friend's lessons.

These issues played out differently again in another, still more intimate context, that of the Sufi order led by one of the Sunni judges I worked most closely with. He was clear that his approach to his judicial duties was deeply affected by his Sufism. He invited me to attend some of the order's ceremonies and again I accepted with alacrity. Two or three times a week, his circle gathered at their lodge in West Beirut, occupying the ground floor of an apartment building on a back street, with one large, somewhat airless room served by a creaking AC unit, a bathroom for ritual ablutions and a tiny kitchen. Here too the ceremonies took place generally between sunset and evening prayers. We would sit, 10–15 of us, on cushions on the floor and follow a set formula of rituals in remembrance of God (*dhikr*) to gain access to divine illumination through the mediation of the order's founding shaykh, with whom our shaykh had studied in Iranian Kurdistan. The founding shaykh had been initiated into both the Naqshbandi and the Qadiri orders, and the path (*tarīqa*) he himself inaugurated combined elements of both. From the Naqshbandis we practiced a silent remembrance of God, sitting in the dark, first meditating on the inevitability of death and then focusing on opening our heart to the shaykh's light. From the Qadiris we took recitation out loud, chanting the name of God with ever greater passion until many of the initiates reached states of ecstasy, frequently exuberantly expressed. Although I had made it clear to the shaykh and the regular members of the circle that I was neither a Muslim nor otherwise religiously committed, my openness to participation in these practices was noted and appreciated.

This openness was understood within the framework of enchantment that was so explicit in the circle's activities. As the shaykh told me, while other branches of the Naqshbandiyya lock the door during the *dhikr*, they left it open. 'That was our shaykh's way. There are two types of men: the seeker and the sought [*al-murīd wa-l-murād*]. The seeker wants to be a member of the order, but might never make it. The sought could be a drinker or a fornicator, but for whatever reason God brings him there. It is God's will.' Whether or not that were the case, it was important to me that I at least not be an obstacle to the circle's devotions: the success of the *hadra*, the 'presenting' of the divine, depends on those participating, whether 'they are helping [*musāʿid*] or not', as the shaykh told me. 'Whether there is sincerity [*ikhlās*] in the circle. Sometimes someone might be holding everyone back. You don't know who.' And indeed some sessions were 'hotter' than others. Could one not handpick the circle to best ensure that, I wondered. 'No. It is God who chooses and arranges things. We are totally open.' The shaykh's right-hand man, who led many of the ceremonies, was more explicit:

> You came from far away and came here to this circle for a reason. What you take part in here, God knows about it, and on judgement day He will take account of it. There are angels around us, one on each shoulder,[17] but also many, many more. Each person has three hundred: you have three hundred around you now. We can't see them of course – it's like air – it's there, but you can't see it with the naked eye. When we are doing *dhikr*, the angels go up to heaven and God asks them, 'Why did you leave them? What were they doing?' 'They are praising you', they tell him. When you go home to London, maybe you will do it a bit yourself, in private. There is a saying of the Prophet: anyone who says there is no God but God [*lā ilāha illa allāh*] with sincerity will enter Paradise. But even if he says it without sincerity, God will discount his sins.

In the privacy and intimacy of the lodge my sitting out – missing out on – the prayers that were an integral part of the rituals was wholly unacceptable to my friends, and I was literally dragged into them.[18] Of course this was not just a way of understanding and accommodating my presence within a formal framework of discourse and practice. It was clearly hoped that the path God had laid out for me included my coming to 'embrace Islam': matters had, to some extent, been taken out of my hands. However, there was no explicit pressure placed on me to do so, although there were certain conditions for my participation. As an adept of my age assigned to me as a special companion told me:

> Whether or not you become a Muslim, that is up to you. But if you come to our place to pray with us you have to be ritually pure [*tāhir*]. There are rules about how to wash. And you have to come with a pure heart. Then hopefully your heart will open, and you will receive some of God's light. You will reach another stage, a higher level. You will be walking in the street, and maybe you will see someone who will teach you something. In your sleep, maybe you will travel. Maybe an angel will come.

A different sort of space had been opened up for me in which to conduct ethnography, and for those I was conducting it with to accommodate me. I entered it gladly – and made sure to wash myself correctly (in my approximate fashion) beforehand.[19]

This engagement with devotion, an attempt to understand it through in some small sense sharing in it, was very valuable to me, and seemed integral to my attempts at anthropological study of Islam. I have to admit that this full-blooded participation in the rituals of the order seemed much closer to archetypal fieldwork than sitting in court in my jacket and carefully ironed shirt and trousers (not that I neglected my dress here either). But it also allowed me to find a place for the divine in my ethnography that had hitherto seemed lacking and was surely, I felt, indispensable. As the custodian of the young shaykh's mosque, who treated me to endless homilies designed to facilitate my conversion, put it to me: 'It's not like working in a laboratory or making a car, knowing about Islam. You've got to feel it.' He would quiz me as to my metaphysical beliefs and was totally astonished

[17] One to record one's good deeds, the other the bad.

[18] And here there was an expectation that I also at least attempt to learn the requisite verbal components.

[19] I did also wash before attending the sermon and prayers at Fadlallah's mosque, although this was not explicitly demanded of me.

when it became clear that they were very far from his. ‘What?! I thought you were learned [*‘ālim*], more learned than me anyway – I can’t even read. Just the Quran, thank God. But this sign [he pointed to a sign over a door as we walked down the street together], I can’t really read it. And you can read Arabic! But now I see you’re nowhere at all.’

Knowledge of ‘The Truth’ (*al-haqīqa*) was being radically restructured in ways that would be hard for me to meet and that became increasingly troubling. Another committed Sufi, long resident in California and member of a different circle from that I commonly frequented, took it upon himself to put the fear of God into me (in English):

> I know you white guys. You want an experience, like a movie. Then you’ll go home and forget all about it. But this isn’t like that. It will haunt you for the rest of your life. People don’t realize, but it starts the moment you die. You don’t get time to look back, see people crying over you – no, straight away two angels come to question you,[20] terrifying, with blue fiery eyes, horns, fangs down to the ground, much more terrible than any movie monster. They say, ‘Who is your lord, who is your leader, which is your people?’ There are angels with you all the time, one on each shoulder recording your deeds. Come judgement day, they will throw them in your face. ‘Why did you do this?’ You won’t be able to say, ‘I didn’t know’. Because you do know, you’ve been told about Islam. You know about *dhikr*, and it says in the Quran that once you know about it, ‘only the blind turn away’. So if you learn about this now and then you ignore it, you will be made among the blind in the afterlife. I’m only telling you this because I don’t want responsibility. I don’t want you blaming me on judgement day.

Anthropological work is not, one hopes, just a matter of wanting ‘an experience’. But it did seem to be entailing awfully high stakes.

In these three different settings, my participation in prayer took three different forms. In Fadlallah’s large mosque, it was allowed, even necessitated by circumstance, understood as a mark of respect and as part of a legitimate intellectual project, but not taken as indicating a religious commitment by those responsible for me. In my young friend’s rather smaller mosque, the possibility of it being seen as such a commitment tended to indicate that direct participation should be avoided in favour of sitting on the sidelines, but thereby created a tension and a teleology towards exactly such a commitment. Within the much more intimate setting of the Sufi circle, such participation was thrust upon me in response to a classical anthropological openness that was seen as both laudable and promising – God knows best. In each setting, I felt I was acting in good faith, and I had the security of the word of the religious authority presiding. But these worlds were not isolates. They were inevitably interpenetrated. Ayatollah Fadlallah’s highly politicised sermons were televised, raising the nightmarish scenario of my acquaintances on the other side of Lebanon’s political divide, not to mention whoever else might be scrutinising the area, seeing me ‘praying behind the sayyid’, and thus taking my commitment to participant observation as a very different kind of commitment, whether to ‘the opposition’ (*al-mu‘ārada*) and ‘heretical’ (i.e. Shi‘i) other, or to a perceived close associate of the ‘terrorist organisation’ Hezbollah.

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[20] Named, in the wider tradition, Munkar and Nakir.

More concretely, however, the world of my young friend's mosque and the Sufi circle were directly intertwined, as the circle held a celebration (*mawlid*) in the mosque every week. If I attended, should I then pray or not? I did attend but I did not pray. This of course raised questions, for my friends and for myself. How sustainable was the ethnographic space that had been opened up for me in the intimate confines of the Sufi circle? And if my openness to the divine was part of the greater plan, then why did it obstinately remain stalled rather than blooming into something finer? These different spaces with their different sets of mandated practices could flourish independently. But, given that those practices were all nominally directed towards the same end, within a nominally unitary field of discourse, the boundaries of those spaces ought in principle to be coterminous rather than distinct. Participating in prayer in one place and not in another could all too easily look like an inconsistent approach to a unitary issue (being Muslim or not) within homogeneous ethical/ethnographic space, rather than a consistent attempt to participate as far as was possible in a variety of distinct ethnographic settings – performing, that is, an anthropological rather than a religious commitment.[21]

Such inconsistency was perceived by myself and others as potentially damaging to my integrity[22]; and it was explicit comment to this effect that led to my more or less abandoning such participation in devotional practice, to the regret of some of my friends no doubt. Such critique came in fact not from them but from 'outsiders' to these circles, themselves bearers of religious authority: from a member of a visiting delegation of shaykhs from Egypt, who expressed his concerns forcefully in an alarming early morning telephone call; and from a pupil of the shaykh of the Sufi order, usually leading his own circle elsewhere, but deputed to lead our ceremonies one week in the shaykh's absence and clearly not briefed as to my circumstances. He was shocked, disgusted even, to discover that I was not a Muslim after the session, having assumed that I was, and his reaction marked, as far as I was concerned, the definitive collapse of this part of my ethnographic project.[23] To others, however,

[21] A comprehensive account of the issues of sincerity at stake here would also touch on the Islamic notion of right intention (*niyya*), vital to the proper fulfilment of Islamic religious obligations (see e.g. McIntosh 2009: 136–42).

[22] I had no desire to find myself effectively posing as a Muslim when I was not one, which seems to be the situation Lukens-Bull got himself into. When he asks (2007: 177), 'Was this ethical?', the answer must surely be no. However, material to my argument here, it was, by his own, refreshingly frank account, his professional ethical commitment to participant observation that brought him to that pass rather than bad faith (ibid.: 176, 182). I must stress that I certainly do not want to claim to be holier than thou, or rather holier than him, in this respect. My own efforts at best ethnographic practice in this domain proved unsustainable (see below), and might not themselves withstand the most determined forensic scrutiny. Rather, I seek to find some theoretical capital to be gained from this mess.

[23] It was, I think, his having been embarrassed at mistaking me – having been deceived, if not with that purpose, by my conduct and demeanour – that was at the root of his discomfort, rather than a determination that participation in Muslim devotion by a non-Muslim was in and of itself reprehensible. The Egyptian shaykh, however, was keen to impress on me that such a path was itself a dangerous one in spiritual terms.

this failure in my engagement with enchantment would be a profound relief. My civil legal colleagues were troubled by my closeness to some of the shaykhs: were I to convert, I might be lost to the cause of civility and legal reform. 'Just be yourself', a distinguished civil judge with a supervisory post in the sharia courts told me in a stage whisper as we sat as guests at a mufti's villa.

Drawing Lines

James Clifford (1997: 204), well known for his critiques of ethnographic practice, quotes an apposite passage from Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques* (1973: 410–11), which, immaterial to Clifford's purposes I should say, directly follows a very ill considered polemic against Islam (ibid.: 401–9). In the Chittagong hill tracts, Lévi-Strauss visits a Buddhist temple, going barefoot and performing the ritual ablutions ('After the climb through the mud ... quite natural and devoid of any religious significance'). His companion moves to perform some prostrations, telling Lévi-Strauss he need not do likewise, and he concurs.

> I did so less through self-consciousness than discretion: he knew that I did not share his beliefs, and I would have been afraid of debasing the ritual gestures by letting him think I considered them as mere conventions: but for once, I would have felt no embarrassment in performing them. Between this form of religion and myself, there was no likelihood of misunderstanding. It was not a question of bowing down in front of idols or of adoring a supposed supernatural order, but only of paying homage to the decisive wisdom that a thinker, or the society that created his legend, had evolved twenty-five centuries before...

While tempted to prostrate himself then, he did not. As Clifford (1997: 205) remarks, another anthropologist might well have done so. But Clifford is not seeking to chastise Lévi-Strauss, or present his decision as typical or exemplary. Rather, he wishes to note that 'a similar line will be drawn somewhere, sometime, in the maintenance of a professional fieldwork habitus.' My own, first point here is that we would do better not to assume that there will be only one such line to be drawn. Such lines are necessarily continuously redrawn across inevitably non-homogeneous social fields. This is not mere ethical relativism: it is a consequence of trying to maintain a common standard of respect and ethnographic commitment in a varied and, in this case, contested ethical domain. Again, the variability and contestability of Islamic discourse and practice has ethnographic consequences prior to its analytical ones.[24]

Secondly, not all lines drawn are of the same sort. Acceding to one's hosts' wishes is not always a matter of participating in devotional practice, for one thing. Further, as Lévi-Strauss so candidly owns, the secular Western imagination finds in its idea of Buddhism, say, a much more sympathetic religion than one where there might be a 'likelihood of misunderstanding', of 'adoring a supposed supernatural

[24] Although one imagines that the same applies to Buddhist discourse, for instance, as well.

order', as would be the case for Islam. The anthropological commitment to participation is hardly supposed to be unbounded, and this surely extends to religious commitments of a universalizing type. While an openness during fieldwork to the exotic and marginal metaphysics of, say, Amazonian shamanism may raise its own issues personally, a receptivity towards, let alone a commitment to the all too familiar other of Christian or Islamic theology seems of a different order, and not so easily perceived as confined to 'the field'.[25] The ethnographic space negotiated in the intimate domain of the Sufi order became hard to sustain in a wider, more public sphere. But line drawings in these areas are not just locally public acts. These sorts of commitments are globally legible. And the massification, objectivification and self-consciousness of religious discourse and practice that global modernisation, secularisation and intensified communication have brought have changed the terrain in this regard.[26]

It is hard to imagine now, for instance, the anthropological world evoked by Michael Lambek (1993: 24–5) in describing his fieldwork on the island of Mayotte in the 1970s:

> Once I started going to the mosque the remark was everywhere: 'Michely is not a *vazaha* [European, white person], he's a *Silamu* [Muslim, one of us].' I was proud but also uncomfortable about this, felt myself a hypocrite, and worried that they might not want an unbeliever in their mosque, miming the prayers. But for them my entry into the mosque transformed me into a Muslim and the concept of mimicking prayer was unthinkable... When people challenged or questioned me, it was less about whether I was coming to believe in Islam or to agree with them than to verify the degree to which I knew the ritual phrases... When Jon Breslar, an American anthropologist, moved into a neighbouring village... he had similar experiences... [O]ur relative competence at doing our jobs (which was a matter of some competition between the villages) was measured largely according to how much recitation each of us knew and how well each of us followed the ritual precepts of Islam.

Lambek presents a classic anthropological trope: rooted as he is in a post-Christian intellectual tradition, he initially misreads religion as belief; his hosts are more interested in ritual practice.[27] One suspects that Mayotte may have changed in this regard, presumably now more closely connected by new communications technologies with the objectified and self-conscious representations of the global Islamic media ecumene. Certainly in all the Islamic contexts I am familiar with, it is

[25] Cf. Lukens-Bull (2007: 186). In this respect, I think Robbins (2003: 192–94) exaggerates the relative anthropological ease of studying Islam over Christianity (Lukens-Bull [2007: 186] puts it the other way round), although he may be influenced by a North American context where Islam is less and fundamentalist Christianity more ubiquitous than in Europe, say. With regard to Christian fundamentalism in the US, Harding's work engages directly with the issues we are concerned with here (1991, 2000: xi–xii, 34–60). For a thoughtful exploration of the challenges for an anthropologist who did convert (to Islam) in the field, see Young (1996: 131–39).

[26] See e.g. Eickelman (1992), Eickelman and Anderson (1999), and Horvatich (1994).

[27] See e.g. Ruel (1992). For the classic exposition of this argument regarding Islam see Smith (1957: 28), and for critique of it see e.g. Asad (1986: 15) and Varisco (2005: 9–10). Lukens-Bull (2007: 183) seems more sympathetic to this line of thinking.

the belief, a conviction (*iqtinā'*) of the truth of the central proposition that there is no God but God and Muhammad is God's messenger, that really matters. Practice can be engaged with, can itself be hoped to be a path to conviction, but it is not conviction itself – and it is that distinction that opened up some of my own ethnographic spaces, in completely the opposite way, it is worth noting, to those opened up for Lambek by his hosts.

Such spaces are opened up in different ways for Muslim ethnographers of course, but that is not to say that they are not closed off in different ways as well. Abdul Hamid el-Zein was a committed Muslim as well as a committed structuralist,[28] a tension that brought him no little personal difficulties, which his own integrity bound him to ignore (Eickelman 1981: 362, 365). And he and his wife clearly faced analogous tensions of some sort working in Lamu among people that thought their island 'the leader of the Islamic world, because it alone has preserved Islam in its purity', and their guests as 'ignorant, if not positively heretical' (El-Zein 1974: xvi, 9). Prayer was a crucial case for me because it can be seen as in itself the fundamental affirmation of a commitment to Islam, incorporating as it does in canonical form the testament of faith, the *shahāda*. Indeed it is precisely this that allows it to be the site where radically different visions of what Islam entails can at least be affirmed together (Henkel 2005). But prayer is not the only possible such location for such dilemmas. Similar questions may be posed for female anthropologists in particular, Muslim and non-Muslim, by practices of modesty (*hijāb*).

Again Clifford (1997: 205) raises the issue, although without, I think, seeing the specificity of the sorts of cases I am interested in:

> Today, in many locations, indigenous people, ethnographers, and tourists all wear T-shirts and shorts. Elsewhere, distinctions of dress are more salient. In highland Guatemala it may be a necessity of decorum, a sign of respect or solidarity, to wear a long skirt or an embroidered shirt in public. But this is hardly cross-dressing. Can, should, an anthropologist wear a turban, yalmulke, *jallabeyya*, *huipil*, or veil? Local conventions vary. But whatever tactics are adopted, they are employed from a position of assumed *cultural* discretion.

These items are not all of the same order, nor all merely matters of local convention. Even if donning *hijāb* might well be a locally situated tactic of cultural discretion, it is also potentially a globally legible sign of a commitment to Islam, and one of a certain type, an endorsement of a particular vision of moral order, although such visions are more variegated than the mere fact of covering the hair, for instance, may be able to signify. Pictures of the ethnographer wearing the veil can be posted on the internet, and become part of their global public image. Equally, so can pictures of them not wearing the veil. New dilemmas arise. A colleague, not a Muslim, who wears the veil in parts of her geographically dispersed field now finds her hosts wanting to be her friends on a well known social networking website. But she uses the site primarily for viewing photos of her pursuing sports where she

[28] On the latter see e.g. El-Zein (1974: xxi, 167 ff).

is necessarily less well covered, indeed scandalously so by her informants' standards. The distinction between public and private selves has become flattened to near zero under globalised media technology (see also Clarke 2009: 207–9), as has the possibility of having more than one public self: after all, my colleague no more wears athletic kit to work in Britain than she does *hijāb*. Her donning *hijāb* during fieldwork is indeed a sign of cultural discretion. But her wearing it in photographs posted on the internet by others for the world to see, as they have, has left her open to critique from feminists in her wider field setting and beyond as a betrayal of the cause, or, less dramatically perhaps, letting the side down. And one can imagine similar dilemmas for Muslim ethnographers too.

Being several people at once is the normal state of affairs in life generally, and almost inevitable for an ethnographer one might suspect. But it can all too easily be called out as 'hypocrisy', and hence, in current professional terms, 'unethical'. Where an earlier generation of ethnographers might have left other selves in the field, the contemporary, globalised world of decentred cultural production, exponentially intensified communications and mass migration has left the classical conception of fieldwork and ethnography out of place and time, as an extensive literature has argued.[29] The difficulties of identifying and 'travelling' to a separated field site have become notorious. The field becomes as impossible to leave as to distinguish, and the ethnographer becomes ever accessible to and survey-able by their subjects as well as their colleagues in ever more intimate detail. The particularity and negotiability of each fieldwork encounter, already problematic on a local level, becomes still harder to parochialise, to keep in its context. Here I want to stress both the ways in which Islam's universal address and global legibility amplify this effect, and that the fundamental contestability of Islamic discourse – there is no one right answer to a given ethical issue, such as whether non-Muslims can attend and participate in prayer amongst Muslims[30] – makes such particularity and parochialism inevitable.[31]

Conclusion

I have sought to relocate the crux of anthropology's particular problems with engaging with Islam as a disciplinary object away from the domain of theory and instead within the ethnography that is basic to it. Theoretical problems with defining categories and boundaries are ubiquitous and are periodically ignored,

[29] E.g. Appadurai (1991), Faubion and Marcus (2009), Gupta and Ferguson (1997), Marcus (1995), Rabinow et al. (2008).

[30] See also Lukens-Bull (2007: 183–85).

[31] To put the relatively trivial concerns of anthropology aside for a moment, for Muslims explaining the genealogy of Islamic commitments at such nodes of this global flattening and policing of moral discourse as airport security checks can be a much more real problem.

polemically debated and ignored again throughout the whole range of the discipline's interests, as indeed every other discipline. But ethnographic issues are not so readily sidestepped as they are posed in the field. In my experience in Lebanon at least, the contestability of religious authority in Islamic settings means that different standards of right behaviour for the ethnographer apply in different settings within one connected field, giving rise to tensions further complicated by the super-connectivity of the wider contemporary world. Lebanon's religious diversity is marked, and it would be hard to delimit a religiously homogeneous field site here. Local standards of due respect across the communitarian landscape in any case mandate as inclusive an address as possible. But one hardly imagines that this diverse micro-ecology is unique to Lebanon. Conflicting standards and commitments are intrinsic to social life, and must be common to ethnographic studies generally and of Islam in particular, and are certainly part of what it means to live in a connected world. 'Participant observation' would seem in some sense itself an ideal, and as such not fully realisable in practice, at least in any ethically coherent sense. And yet it is nevertheless worth pursuing, indeed vital to the anthropological vocation, according to the mainline of the tradition at least.[32] Unless one concludes, then, that anthropology as ideally practiced is a fundamentally unethical activity, such tensions are necessary to it.

Zein's challenge thus matters, or should matter, to anthropologists not so much because of fears of theoretical paralysis, but because anthropologists, committed as they are to the ethnographic method, know intimately how much defining Islam matters to the people they work with. As in other areas no doubt, a disciplinary ambivalence towards erecting an 'anthropology of Islam' would be better seen as stemming not from philosophical scepticism but from personal appreciation. And recognition of that should spur anthropologists to continue with their more or less ad hoc and imperfect comparative categories and ventures as they necessarily must, while continuing to harbour and express their reservations in this regard. This is less a vicious logical inconsistency, then, than an anthropologically virtuous grounding in inevitably conflicting social relationships.[33] It is the personal contact enjoined by anthropology's emphasis on fieldwork that makes studying Islam anthropologically so rewarding, often a joy. But knowing intimately how much such things matter entails in turn a further recognition, that an anthropology of Islam is not an impossibility, but a duty.

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[32] Asad for one has challenged this (2003: 16–17).

[33] Anthropologists are committed to the recognition of their informants' commitments. But they are not, surely – and this is where the problematic nature of 'participant observation' of practices of commitment really bites – thereby bound to commit to those various and potentially conflicting commitments themselves.

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