

J R Bowen, A new anthropology of Islam

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In the central thesis of his seminal book, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*,¹ Samuel Huntington viewed the transformation of conflict from national interests or realist terms towards greater focus on cleavages between civilisations. In the process, Huntington laid out a singular, monolithic, almost unchanging Islamic civilisation. This, however, is as far from reality as possible. In this penetrating study, esteemed anthropologist John Bowen lucidly demonstrates that there are many different 'Islams' as Muslims from Asia, Africa and Western Europe have adapted Islamic texts and traditions to ideas and conditions in the societies in which they live. In the process, Bowen advances an understanding of Islam as it is lived and understood by Muslims. Such understanding is never more needed as sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians and between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims continues to take a heavy death toll of the innocent.

Utilising various studies undertaken in social anthropology, Bowen demonstrates Islam's constitutive practices, from praying and learning to judging and political organising. What is different about this study is that a great deal of research by theologians and academics focuses on the important work of this or that Muslim cleric or intellectual. Whilst certainly examining Islam from this perspective, one also gets a bottom-up approach from the anthropological perspective by Bowen who explains how intellectual production draws on the everyday habits of life of ordinary Muslims. The reason for this is obvious. Anthropologists currently studying Islam start from the socially embedded chains of human interpretation that link modern-day practices across societies and over time.

This new anthropology of Islam has placed an increased emphasis on religious texts and ideas, but only as they are understood and transmitted in particular times and places. After all, Muslims living in particular places have adapted Islamic traditions to local values and constraints, and these adaptations have given rise to vigorous debates among Muslims over what is or is not correctly Islamic. Far from ignoring scripture, anthropology increasingly seeks to understand how particular Muslims come to understand and use particular passages. As Bowen (2012) pointedly notes, "What distinguishes anthropologists from an older generation of textual scholars is that we are as interested in how a Pakistani farmer, an

1 Huntington, S. 1996. *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of the world order*. New York: Touchstone.

Egyptian engineer, or a French Muslim theologian sees the Qur'an as we are in the knowledge held by a traditional Muslim scholar".

Such a perspective takes one beyond a rigid, singular and unchanging Islam, but one which is dynamic and constantly being informed by the social milieu which it inhabits. In India, for instance, Sufi Islam's notions of grace and sainthood have melded with local Hindu forms of worship so that it is not an uncommon practice to see Muslims and Hindus worshipping at the same shrines. These same Sufi notions of worship were simultaneously adapted to fit a pre-existing social framework based on lineage structures in the African context. In Somalia, for instance, Sufi notions of reverence for the saints were translated into reverence for the founding fathers of one's clan which provided social coherence and religious legitimacy as well as a sense of belonging to members of the same clan. Thus, religious worship serves a social function. In demonstrating this, ordinary Muslims are exposed as not being merely passive 'receptors' of Islamic knowledge, but also as producers of such knowledge and practitioners in their own right.

The changing dynamics is clearly evident in the realm of learning. Children receiving religious instruction at schools (*madrasas*) are taught in a variety of different ways. In Morocco, for instance, the emphasis is on Qur'an memorisation. Iranian students, meanwhile, are encouraged to engage in debates on Qur'anic text. Yemeni children attending *madrasas* stand between the Moroccan and Iranian traditions. They are expected to make their own manuscript copies of the texts being studied in order to memorise and discuss meanings on their own.

Often political scientists and other scholars are too quick to categorise an Islamic movement into this or that watertight compartment. Bowen's social anthropological approach suggests that such exercises in labelling may be a foolhardy enterprise. His books emphasise that this fluidity in Islam also impacts on Muslim organisations. Consider, in this instance, the oldest political 'party' in Egypt – the Muslim Brotherhood established by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. When asked to define the Brotherhood, al-Banna responded that it was "... a Salafiyya² message, a Sunni³ way, a Sufi⁴ truth, a political organization, an athletic group, a cultural-educational union, an economic company, and a social idea".

2 *Salafis* are those urging Muslims to return to the religion's origins and the practices of the first generations of Muslims (*salafs*).

3 At the time of the Prophet Muhammed's death in CE 632, the Muslim community was divided as to who should succeed him. The majority (Sunni) believed that Abu Bakr should succeed the Prophet, whereas a minority (Shi'ite) believed that only members of the Prophet's family may succeed him as rule of the Muslim polity.

4 *Sufi* refers to those followers of the mystical traditions of Islam.

Bowen's illuminating and highly accessible book is a must-read for policymakers, academics, journalists or the ordinary lay person who seeks to understand contemporary Islam in these turbulent times. It is an incisive, academically rigorous book which deals with its subject matter in a critical, but sympathetic manner.

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