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Review of The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction

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***The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction*, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV, New York: New York University Press, 2017. Hardcover, 89.00, ISBN: 9781479882670, Paperback, 28.00, ISBN: 9781479804887**

The demand, indeed urgency, within the American Academy for courses on Islam has perhaps never been greater than at current. Yet, the very conditions that create this urgency also produce anxieties for those fulfilling this pedagogical role. The challenge confronting many of us - knowing that our students will enter the classroom with ideas/questions about Islam stemming, in large part, from what they've encountered through popular media and the news – is how to carry out this work in a way that both acknowledges this abiding, even if delimiting, contemporary context *without* allowing our teaching to be subsumed by it. How to engage with students' a priori ideas and questions *without* assuming a pedagogical posture that offers 'correctives' rather than a different point of entry into conversations about Islam. How to provide students with knowledge about Islam that they can "hold onto" *without* fixing Islam in ways that reproduce totalizing or singular conceptions of this, or any, religious tradition.

Edward Curtis' edited volume, *The Practice of Islam in America*, provides both the methodological tools and content to resolve a number of these conundrums. It is a valuable and effective resource for all those invested in the academic study and teaching of Islam broadly, as well as the more particular context of the United States. The strength of this four-part text, comprised of twelve individually authored essays, can be enumerated in a variety of ways. For the purpose of this review, my comments will focus on its pedagogical breadth and utility; the capacity of this volume of essays to (individually and collectively) provide teachers and students with an array of ethnographic evidence to assist students in gaining a fuller understanding of Islam as a textual, historical and lived tradition.

Deconstructing Islam

The book is divided into four sections, addressing key areas of "Prayer and Pilgrimage," "Holidays," "Life Cycle Rituals," and "Islamic Ethics and Religious Culture." The essays within each section address the major tenants of Islam such as the Hajj, prayer, and dietary restrictions, in addition to Islamic practices less often explored in the classroom. Ethnographically rich essays on topics such as marriage, death rites, and commemorative events like the birth of the prophet and remembrance of Imam Hassan and Hussain, provide students with a range of topics for exploration, including Islamic beliefs and practices that have often been the source of debate and disagreement amongst Muslims. In so doing, the text demonstrates not only the breadth, but also instability, of Islam in a way that avoids universalisms. An example of this can be drawn from Marcia Hermansen's essay "Milad/Mawlid: Celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's Birth." Hermansen begins, and thereby frames the readers approach to her essay, by clarifying that "...the content and performance of Milad's are malleable according to diverse contexts and forms. They may be occasions for prompting unity within and across Muslim communities but may also be contested or received in divisive ways" (p. 129). In creating a space for these "contested" practices to be read and approached as "Islamic," students learn that the category of "Islam" is itself constituted in uneven ways, including within the realm of legibility even those practices that hold a more precarious position. In so doing, the essays in this text, enable students' focus to be shifted away from the question of what is/is not Islamic, compelling them to consider how Islamic claims are enacted and embodied by Muslims today. The fact that the practice of Eid-Milad-u-Nabi is

neither universally nor uniformly practiced, does not diminish the reality that many Muslims perform this commemorative ritual in order to reaffirm their faith in Islam and respect for its Prophet. In fact, the inclusion of such practices only nuances and expands students understanding of both the historical formation of Islam, and how it is approached and embodied today.

The essays in this book are tied together by a shared commitment to demonstrating the stability alongside the instability of Islam – as an analytic, historical tradition, and set of embodied and articulated practices. If Islamic marriage rites seem to suggest shared consensus on the theological basis for marriage, then, as Julianne Hammer’s essay “Love and Mercy in Marriage Contracts” richly demonstrates that the practices involved with a Muslim marriage vary substantially across religious (sect of Islam), racial, socio-cultural, and economic contexts (p. 166). Drawing upon an ethnographically vast array of data from the marriage ceremonies of an African American, Arab-American, and Pakistani-American couple, Hammer’s essay highlights the historical differences amongst Muslim communities in the US, demonstrating the ways in which these specificities in turn inform important differences in the practices associated with Muslim marriages - from when and where the marriage will take place to the number and variety in events (p.185). The question of whether these seemingly non-religious practices ought to be viewed as religious or cultural, is neither explicitly nor implicitly addressed, but this is precisely the point: when Islam is approached as a lived tradition, it widens the scope of what constitutes Islamic practice. The importance of this lesson cannot be overstated as it effectively blurs the problematic, albeit popular, dichotomy between and religion/culture, thereby allowing students to approach to Islam as discursive tradition, steeped in authoritative texts, but also shifting across time, place and context (Asad, 1985).

Similarly, the text’s inclusion of Sufi practices, via Rosemary Corbett’s essay, “Dhikr: Remembering the Divine”, compels students to consider the differences between forms of devotion within Islam. *Dhikr* is not quite prayer nor is it wholly remembrance; it is enacted “not simply to give thanks for a particular blessing or even to remind oneself periodically of God’s power and presence”. Rather, dhikr is a process of becoming that Sufi practitioners enact in order “to take steps to become more Godly human beings, and to eventually enter the state of constant dhikr, continually mindful of God’s closeness” (p. 37). Students learn from this, that while salat (daily prayer) is one, and perhaps the most dominant, form of ritual prayer, other forms of devotion not only exist, but do so in a way that cannot easily be collapsed into a singular category. They learn that understanding Islam requires developing and drawing upon multiple grammars.

America as a Site for the Study of Islam

An additional layer of complexity emerges from the texts clear aim to demonstrate the diversity of Islam and Muslims not just broadly, but within and between Muslim communities in America. The lesson that ideas about Islam are mediated by geographical and cultural considerations is abiding within the text, but the focus on America alerts students to the diversity and variance within the histories, practices and lived experiences of Muslim communities within the shared geographical context of the United States. The “Americanness” of Islam, or rather variation and specificity of Muslim-American experiences, emerges most saliently at the intersection of religion and the state, particularly in instances where Muslim practices are subject to the management and regulation of legal regimes. Amir Hussain’s essay, “Funerals and Death Rites: Honoring the Departed,” punctuates this point by addressing the way that Muslim burial rituals are both scrutinized and

subject to regulation by the secular state. He notes that, “Since the deceased was to be buried without a casket, the cemetery required concrete linear to comply with health regulations” (p. 196). Compliance with state regulations, As Hussain notes, has sometimes become the source of contestations between Muslim communities and the state: “In June 2016 the town of Dudley, Massachusetts, denied the local Islamic community the opportunity to build a cemetery on land that they had purchased,” citing the rationale that Muslim burial practices were environmentally corrosive (p. 200).

Similarly, Jackleen Salem’s essay, “Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid -al- Adha: Fasting and Feasting,” sheds light on the everyday challenges faced by Muslim Americans fasting in a predominantly non-Muslim society, as well as the long-standing and often arduous efforts of Muslim communities to gain the state’s recognition of Muslim holidays as official American holidays (p. 101). The struggle that is palpable in these encounters between Islam and the American state, serves to remind students of the ways in which Islam has historically been construed as a “foreign” religion, despite evidence to the contrary. It also serves as a poignant reminder of the ways in which the current climate of Islamophobia, exacerbated since 9/11, produces new possibilities for Islamophobia. *The Practice of Islam in America* speaks to the precarity that emerges at the intersection of Islam and America; the difficulties associated with inhabiting a hyphenated identity. The ethnographic experience of Muslims in America captured by this text, therefore demonstrate the role that Islam plays in shaping Muslim American experience, as well as establishing the boundaries of American secularism.

Ethnographic Evidence as Islamic Evidence

The Practice of Islam in America is also demonstrative of the power of ethnography to serve as religious evidence; the kind that simultaneously grounds and destabilizes our approach to and understanding of Islam as a theological, historical, and lived tradition. Tracing these complexities is not merely a matter of surfacing lived experience in a way that blurs the boundary between theology and practice, but also demonstrating the instability of the very theological concepts that foreground the ethnographic contexts explored. If belief in *salat* (prayer) is shared between Sunnis and Shia’s then, as Rose Aslan’s essay “Daily prayers in Muslim America” points out, practices of prayer “differ slightly in their interpretation of how to carry them out” (p. 22). Similarly, if the centrality of Mecca as the first of house of Islam is shared amongst Muslims, the originary stories and sources cited in order to establish its sacredness demonstrate degrees of difference (p. 60). The extent to which the ethnographic serves as a way of dismantling the conceptions of a singular Islam is one strength of the text; but it is enjoined by the shared commitment of its authors’ to treat Islam seriously as an analytic, as well as an intellectual, historical, and lived tradition. Yet, this brings me to perhaps my one criticism of the text. There are moments when more attention to the interplay and impact of raced, classed and gendered dynamics on the practice of Islam would have strengthened the text overall. These intersections are certainly touched upon in a number of essays, but they are not fully explored, relegating this as an area to be raised and explored by students and instructors. Perhaps this relatively absent analyses stems from the fact that the central aim of the text - to demonstrate, through ethnographically grounded claims, the breadth of Islam broadly and within the United States – lies elsewhere. It is nonetheless, a testament to the strength of this text – the range of topics, and commitment to demonstrating the plurality of Islam – that I have chosen to assign this text as required reading for both my freshman and advanced level undergraduate courses on Islam in America. The text is best suited for undergraduate instruction at all levels, and

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will be useful in a variety of course design scenarios. In more historically inclined courses, this text will fulfill the vital function of providing students with a sense of the range of variation in beliefs and practices that constitute the basis of Islam. In more theologically oriented courses, the text will play the equally vital role of deconstructing the notion of a singular Islam, demonstrating the multiple and contested ways in which Islamic beliefs are enacted and embodied by everyday Muslims. Both students and instructors will benefit from the contributions of this well-conceived, highly accessible, and indeed enlightening, text.

References

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