Book Review

Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East

By Michael Gilsenan. London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 1993, 287 pp.

Michael Gilsenan is an anthropologist who has done extensive fieldwork in Egypt and Lebanon and has extensive knowledge of the literature, paticularly ethnography, on the Middle East, including North Africa. His book *Recognising Islam* is a detailed ethnography of the practice of Islam in the Middle East. When it was first published, it was considered a significant anthropological contribution to the understanding of the complexities of Islamic societies in the Middle East. To be more precise, it is about Islam as practiced in the villages and urban centers of Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Iran. These are the places from which he draws illustrative enthnographic material, weaving into the narrative his analysis of the specific case studies of urban and village life showing how Islam is practiced in the context of much larger national and international events taking place.

The Islam that Gilsenan wishes to be recognized is not that of the literate specialists or of learned sheikhs. Neither is it of theological discussions and debate, although no doubt it has implications for those debates, nor is it of Orientalist conceptions or the Western media's caricature of Muslims as the inscrutable "other"—the barbarous, corrupt, enemy of Christianity, and nemesis of Western civilization. In other words, the focus on the practice of Islam in the villages of the Middle East and urban enclaves of such major cities as Cairo is not just a description of the exotic or strange practices of people as bounded entities, each one being an isolated species of Muslim groupings. Rather, Gilsenan's work shows how daily life is informed by

Islam, informs us of the practical Islam of "the people"—those social classes and strata not usually considered in a work on religion and belief.

The book, therefore, is not based on the works of scholars of Islam or of Muslim scholars, or on extensive tracts of political, social, or economic data, but on the participant observations of an anthropologist. Gilsenan's account, necessarily, is interpretative but succeeds in showing how history and class forces and Islam have shaped the worldview and imponderabilia of the daily lives of the underclasses and of the petty bourgeoisie in the towns and countryside of the Middle East. The book may be read, therefore, as an incisive narrative of how ordinary people live in the Middle East seemingly oblivious to the very real effect that national and international political and economic events have on them. This, in itself, would be a valuable exercise for those who are blithely ignorant of Islam and the Middle East.

The book consists of ten chapters. The introduction lays out the reasons for writing the book and what are the main issues to be analyzed. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the formation and transformation of power, authority, leadership of the ulema, sheikhs, and sayyeds, among others, bearing in mind that, theoretically at least, there is no priestly hierarchy. His point is that leadership is differentially created, recreated, and transformed in various historical contexts, be this a Moroccan rural village of the Ottoman empire, the power urban centers, or early twentieth-century Iran under the impact of capitalism. These issues are examined again in chapters 4–7, in the context of what Gilsenan calls "grace, miracles, holy descent and mystical Sufi brotherhoods," but showing how, with the emergence of new classes under the impact of colonialism and postcolonialism, Islam came to be redefined by both the new rulers and the underclasses.

In chapters 8 and 9, although Gilsenan continues to analyze the issue of power, he makes a departure into an analysis of power's spatial dimensions. Here, he shows how the spatial arrangement of settlements (the mosque, residential areas, and market places in a village or city) as well as the arrangement of furniture in a domestic unit, are as much a function of political and economic power as of religious status in a community of believers. But the advent of colonialism and capitalism promoted fundamental change. He contrasts the gridlike pattern of colonial urban centers with the apparent maze of alley and pathways of the casbah, the village with the city, the massive buildings of powerful rulers with the mud dwellings of the underclass, the ostentatious rococo style of the new petty bourgeoisie to the cheap furniture of the working class. His point, as he makes clear in chapter 10, is not that this represents a tradition–modernity trajectory, but rather that the change taking place in the Middle East, particularly in the cities, opens up a host of new possibilities for contestation, between and among religious and political movments, to interpret and influence unfolding events.

Underlying the ten chapters are three important points. First, Islam prescribes very similar institutions to guide one's whole social, political,

and economic life with a set of concepts based entirely on the Qur'an (the Word) and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions (the Sunnah and the hadith). These are the "fundamentals" of Islam, as he calls them, about which there is no dispute among different groupings within the Muslim world. Yet, he contends that Islamic beliefs may, and indeed do, have contrasting meanings with very different purposes from one community to another. Thus, to use an example from his book, the scholars of al-Azhar University may dispute Sufism as representing "true" Islam, but this would not invalidate the claim to be Muslim. Fundamental to this is who has the power and authority to define and have recognized what represents "true" Islam. Thus, Gilsenan's point is that the interpretation and constant reinterpretation of Islam—the different meanings of Islam—is not just a theological debate, but concerns Muslims living as they do in a part of the world whose internal social and political systems are vastly complex, different from state to state, and the interaction of which affects their daily lives in ways that belie the monolithic picture portrayed in the Western media.

This leads to the second major point: The Muslim community is not homogeneous (this applies in the Middle East as well as anywhere else in the world). It consists of different classes and groups that are constantly reinventing traditions to either advance or defend their interests at the local level. There are ample case studies to this effect.

Gilsenan is most convincing when he demonstrates this in relation to his own fieldwork in Lebanon and Egypt. Indeed, his description of the Muslim petty bourgeoisie would not be out of place in South Africa. Of course, to show that there are indeed divisions within Islam might annoy those who seek a pristine Islam, untainted by historical processes, particularly colonialism and capitalism (it would be unrealistic to assume a homogenous *ummah*).

But what is important about Gilsenan's analysis of the divisions within Islam is that it is not part of a political strategy of states or a conspiracy to undermine Islam. Indeed, his point is precisely the opposite: The strength of Islam is its openness to other views, a tolerance of otherness, an acknowledgment that, historically, other traditions and cultures have been and are incorporated into the Muslim soul. This openness does not mean that such institutions as modern states, Muslim brotherhoods, or political elites of various kinds would not want to reformulate or use Islam for their own purposes, be it to legitimate their authority or to oppose colonialism or neocolonialism. And this is the third point, that the reformulation of Islam by the state (or nation-state), elites as well as ordinary people in the modern world, is largely a response to colonialism and the penetration of capitalist relations of production that have the effect of constantly disrupting their lives.

Although Gilsenan makes the point that, in contemporary times, it is precisely the hegemony over the interpretation and the contestation of the "tradition" of Islam that can inform much of the politics of predominantly

Muslim populated states in the Middle East, he does not elaborate on this. Or when he does attempt to do so, it is not as satisfying as his analysis of, for example, village politics or of a particular Sufi brotherhood in the poor quarter of Cairo. This, perhaps, is where the book leaves a gap, because it is not precisely clear how and in what ways the village is linked to the urban center, and thus, in turn, to major shifts in metropolitan centers around the world, or whether indeed the village or the slum quarter of Algeria or Egypt has any effect on what is ordinarily perceived as a one-way stream of influence from urban center to village.

Thus, while Gilsenan's grasp of local-level politics is astute and the interpretation sympathetic and makes very clear the interaction between Islam, its representation by different strata within society and the action of people, its links with national and international political developments is undefined. This would be an unfair criticism, bearing in mind Gilsenan's aims, which do not include extending the analysis in that direction. But it is nevertheless an area to be explored.

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