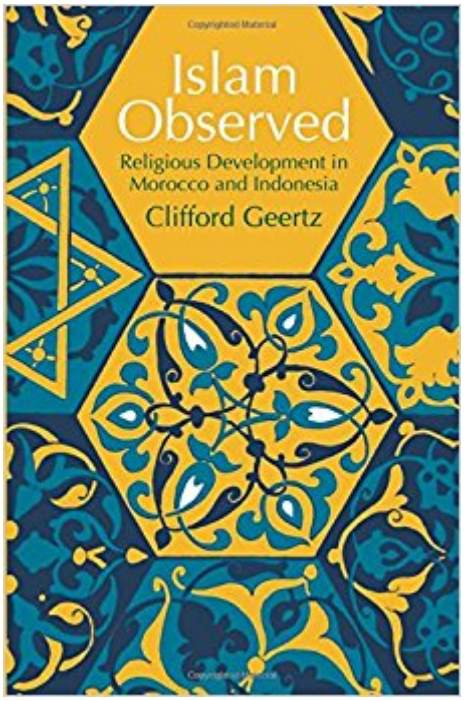
Islam Observed: Religious Development In Morocco And Indonesia (Phoenix Books)



Synopsis

"In four brief chapters," writes Clifford Geertz in his preface, "I have attempted both to lay out a general framework for the comparative analysis of religion and to apply it to a study of the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting civilizations, the Indonesian and the Moroccan."Mr. Geertz begins his argument by outlining the problem conceptually and providing an overview of the two countries. He then traces the evolution of their classical religious styles which, with disparate settings and unique histories, produced strikingly different spiritual climates. So in Morocco, the Islamic conception of life came to mean activism, moralism, and intense individuality, while in Indonesia the same concept emphasized aestheticism, inwardness, and the radical dissolution of personality. In order to assess the significance of these interesting developments, Mr. Geertz sets forth a series of theoretical observations concerning the social role of religion.

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Customer Reviews

’In four brief chapters, ’ writes Clifford Geertz in his preface, ’I have attempted both to lay out a general framework for the comparative analysis of religion and to apply it to a study of the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting civilizations, the Indonesian and to Moroccan.’

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) was a cultural anthopologist. At the time of his death he was professor

emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He was professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago from 1960 to 1970. He carried out fieldwork in Indonesia and North Africa, which forms the basis ofÃ Â hisÃ Â books published by the University of ChiocagoÃ Â Press.

This short book was originally delivered as the Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion and Science for 1967 at Yale University. It is customary for the lecturer to say nice things about the hosting institution and the series of lectures in which he makes his entry. But Clifford Geertz is very honest about his purpose and direct about the limitations he faces. He thinks that comparative religion "hardly more than merely exists" as a scientific discipline, and that the kind of sociology of religion first outlined by Max Weber is "still very largely a program". A science of religion may forever be beyond our grasp. What's more, he has doubts about the Terry Foundation's stated goal of "building the truths of science and philosophy into the structure of a broadened and purified religion". For a self-confessed non-religious person who sees science and religion as fundamentally antagonistic, this program doesn't really sound like a good idea. Geertz conceives of science and religion as competing against each other in a "struggle for the real" and, although he sits squarely on the side of science, he doesn't preclude the possibility that religion may, in the end, win the day.As the author states at the outset, in his typically ironical fashion, "the comparative study of religion has always been plagued by this peculiar embarrassment: the elusiveness of its subject matter." There are two reasons for this. First, as other social scientists also have noted, "it is extremely difficult to get phenomenologically accurate descriptions of religious experience." Try to talk to a mystic in a trance, or to a priest absorbed in the accomplishment of his rites. Even the most direct, first-hand testimonies, such as the quotes and narratives collected by William James in his Varieties of Religious Experience, are mere recollections after the facts, imperfect efforts to put words on what cannot be named or described. Freud encountered the same problem when he set to write The Interpretation of Dreams. On the other hand, as Geertz notes, a religious perspective on things doesn't limit itself to the perimeter of the sanctuary. The experience of the sacred suffuses and influences the entire worldview of people who have been visited by God's spirit. "Like the philosophers in Plato's cave, they are back in a world of shadows they interpret in a different way as a result of having been, for a moment, in the sunlight."The second factor that makes religion an elusive phenomenon is the general tendency to substitute clichÃƒÂ© for description, and assumption for analysis. Words can be deceptive: categories encourage the "pigeonhole approach" of ordering the real in neat cases, without asking oneself first "whether there really are any pigeons in all of these pigeonholes", or by assuming that "whatever is in a particular sort of pigeonhole must

be a particular sort of pigeon". By putting a name on things, we assume we have a firm grasp on them, and we begin to build theories based around nebulous concepts that obfuscate as much as they reveal. From the definition of dendrolatry, or tree worship (a favorite of the author, and said to be especially prevalent in India), we assume that there are "dendrolators practicing dendrolatry in arcane dendrolatological ceremonies". This is not to say that we should stop speaking about "religion" altogether: after all, "these rather singular things certain people do, believe, feel, or say somehow belong together with sufficient intimacy to submit to a common name." But we should be careful about interpreting meaning: what "mystical", or indeed "Islam", means in the two contexts studied by Clifford Geertz, a Moroccan walled city and an Indonesian market town, turns out to be very far from the same thing.So what do Islam and mysticism mean in the context of Morocco and Indonesia? The two places couldn't be further apart: "They both incline toward Mecca, but, the antipodes of the Muslim world, they bow in opposite directions." Instead of describing islamic rules and norms in the abstract, Geertz starts from exemplary figures that each embody the "classical style" of religion in Indonesia and in Morocco. The Indonesian figure is Sunan Kalidjaga, the most important of the so-called "nine apostles" traditionally considered to have introduced Islam into Java and, more or less single-handedly and without resort to force, converted its population to the new creed. The story of his conversion--sitting by the side of a river and meditating the doctrines of Islam without any textual basis--establishes the link between a world of god-kings, ritual priests, and declamatory shrines and one of pious sultans, Koranic scholars, and austere mosques. The Moroccan figure set off against Kalidjaga is a historical character known as Sidi Lahsen Lyusi or Al-Yousi, whose biography has been masterfully authored by the French scholar Jacques Berque. Caught in a spiritual cauldron in which "doctrinal ardor and rustic violence produced vivid personalities, some benefic, some not, locked in a combat cruel and picturesque", Lyusi was a turbulent wanderer, seeking to capture truth not by waiting patiently for it to manifest itself to its emptied consciousness, but by tirelessly and systematically tracking it down.Confronting a Javanese quietist like Kalidjaga with a Berber zealot like Lyusi reveals two "classical styles" of religion: "On the Indonesian side, inwardness, imperturbability, patience, poise, sensibility, aestheticism, elitism, and an almost obsessive self-effacement, the radical dissolution of individuality; on the Moroccan side, activism, fervor, impetuosity, nerve, toughness, moralism, populism, and an almost obsessive self-assertion, the radical intensification of individuality." These religious traditions--illuminationism and maraboutism--are now embattled and transformed by three developments: "the establishment of Western domination; the increasing influence of scholastic, legalistic, and doctrinal, that is to say, scriptural, Islam; and the crystallization of an activist

nation-state". The general movement toward "an Islam of the book rather than of the trance or the miracle" is associated with the rise of a radical and uncompromising Islam: Geertz labels this historical moment the "scripturalist interlude". He notes that "stepping backward in order better to leap is an established principle in cultural change; our own Reformation was made that way. But in the Islamic case the stepping backward seems often to have been taken for the leap itself." Unsure of the issue of that interlude, he concludes with the two figures that have led their countries toward independence, and who both represent a reactualization of the classical style: "With Sukarno the theater state returned to Indonesia; and with Muhammed V maraboutic kingship returned to Morocco." "Whether these revamped traditions, having been construed, can now persist depends upon whether the pattern of life they imply is viable in a semi-modern nation-state in the latter part of the twentieth century."Although Clifford Geertz warns the reader against the simplifying assumptions of general categories, his most fruitful insights come from the ordering of his empirical material through working concepts and dual oppositions that help structure the field of comparative religion. He borrows from Max Weber the opposition between hereditary and personal charisma, and sees the two at work in the figure of the Moroccan warrior saint or "homme fÃƒÂ©tiche", who claims both extraordinary powers and direct lineage to the Prophet. He introduces the Weberian distinction between the "intrinsic" theory of legitimacy, which sees authority inherent in the ruler as ruler, and finds its expression in the Shia notion of a sacred leader or Imam; and the "contractual" theory he traces to the Sunni concept of a sacred community, the Umma. Again, the Moroccan Sultanate combines both notions of legitimacy: the principle that the ruler is ruler because he is supernaturally qualified to be so, and the principle that the ruler is ruler because the competent spokesmen of the community have collectively agreed that he is.Another useful notion is the distinction between "religiousness" and "religious-mindedness": between being held by religious convictions and holding them. Religious-mindedness, celebrating belief rather than what belief asserts, is the result of a process of ideologization of religion brought about by the twin forces of secularism and scripturalism. In both countries, the loss of spiritual self-confidence results in the transformation of religious symbols from imagistic revelations of the divine, evidence of God, to ideological assertions of the divine's importance, badges of piety. Geertz also makes a distinction between the "force" of a cultural pattern like religion, the thoroughness with which such a pattern is internalized by the individual, and its "scope", the range of social contexts with which religious considerations are regarded having more or less direct relevance. As he notes, the force of religion is, generally speaking, greater in Morocco than in Indonesia, while its scope is narrower.These distinctions make Observing Islam a valuable contribution to the field of comparative religion. They also help structure

modern debates with more realistic and differentiated typologies than the simple assumptions, now so commonly found in the media, of a "rise of fundamentalism" or a "clash between tradition and modernity". The observance of Islam can only be grasped and understood through its close observation: Islam needs to be observed if we are to draw any meaningful conclusion regarding its meaning and direction.

When I picked up this book, I was mainly reading for the analysis of Moroccan Islam. However, Geertz approaches both countries in such an eloquent and accessible fashion.The purpose of this short work is to compare the practices of Muslims in Indonesia and Morocco. That’s going to be tough to do, but Geertz admits to the inherent problems early on, and (I believe) succeeds in confronting them by the end of the book. He begins with the introduction of Islam to both spaces, and covers the formative periods of their religious development. He ends each analysis during the post-colonial phases of the country’s history. The concluding chapter, which draws conclusions regarding the comparison of religious sensibilities, does so through the capturing of a society’s "common sense". Geertz plays this out much better than I ever could, but it suffices to say that Geertz comes to very thoughtful conclusions about our imagination-made-large qua religion.I’d recommend this book to anyone who is interested in comparative religion, Islam, North African/Asian Islam, or who wants to read a really cool ethnography.

Although written in 1971 Geertz’ observations are just as valid today as then. It also goes a long ways towards giving explanation to the rise of militant Islam. All who are curious about that phenomenon should read this little book.

This book is exactly what I would imagine a renowned scholar to pen at the end of a long and illustrious career. There is less actual comparative religion between Morocco and Indonesian Islam than there is long philosophical lead-ins to the data. The book reads as if all of Geertz’s personal hobby ideas and associated banter could no longer be contained by the mental space allotted them. "Islam Observed" is an intellectual flood release of Geertz’s mental career in the study of humanities and its subtle curiosities.Between the extended paragraphs of intellectual jargon, Geertz does manage to compare two time periods in Morocco and Indonesia each along with leading figures of social and religious transformation or renewal. Both Morocco and Indonesia are similar in their emphasis on mystical Islam. Morocco, however, was able to intertwine politics and Sufism like few Muslim nations at the time. Morocco was both orthodox and Sufi.Unlike Morocco’s civilization, "built

on nerve", Indonesia was built on diligence. Indonesia's Islamic evolution was "adaptive, absorbent, pragmatic... a matter of partial compromises... a largeness of spirit (pg 16)." By the time "scriptural Islam" began to reform both Morocco and Indonesia, they each had developed different identities through history, genres of conquest and methods of leadership.In Morocco, Sufi saints were tied to the wars they fought or encouraged. Morocco built an Islamic identity from Berber warriors, Crusade clashes and Arabic credentials. In Indonesia, the political and religious identity was not wrapped in a single leader. In both countries, Islam is a zealous passion but a closer look at "Islam observed" through a historical and political lens will reveal two very different personalities.If you are looking for a clear look at Moroccan and Indonesian Islamic identities, this book will disappoint. If you enjoy an immersion in anthropological discussions and opinions loosely bound in Islamic topics, you might find this book interesting. In any case, it's a short read.

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