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Understanding Islam between Theology and Anthropology: Reflections on Geertz's *Islam Observed*

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Abstract: There is a divergence between religion and its modes of application, or religion and religiosity. This essay provides a critical analysis of Clifford Geertz's book *Islam Observed* and tries to attempt the question of whether Islam is better understood exclusively as a set of socially conditioned symbols and practices. However, an anthropological interpretation solely based on symbols leaves much to be desired as it lends itself to a kind of radical relativism in which generalizable conclusions become impossible. The theological approach tends to bypass the role sociopolitical contexts play in sustaining, negotiating, and modifying religious doctrines. Islam has been studied from the perspectives of these two mutually exclusive methodologies. This study attempts to arrive at an interdisciplinary analysis in which theology and anthropology cooperate to formulate a comprehensive understanding of Islam as a social system sustained by specific practices and as a theological structure communicated through a dialogue between abstract doctrines and mundane rituals.

Keywords: Geertz; Islam; marabouts; religious anthropology; Sufism; popular theology; theology

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1. Introduction

Two divergent yet complementary approaches have dominated the field of Islamic Studies: the traditional historical and theological as opposed to the anthropological. One observes a growing interest among anthropologists in religious systems and doctrines. According to Robbins (2006), Christianity has recently become an established topic for ethnographic research. Moreover, the burgeoning field of Christian Anthropology has been lately vociferous in its call on anthropologists to consider Christianity a constituent part of their intellectual heritage (Robbins 2013).

As regards Islam, its encounter with anthropological inquiry is not new. Coleman (2010) recounts how he felt like a neophyte in a workshop organized by SOAS in 2009 on the developments in the anthropology of Islam as a self-conscious project compared to the novelty of the same interest in Christian anthropology.

Robbins (2006) outlines three possible ways in which the relationship between theology and anthropology could be perceived. The first studies the role theology plays in the formation of anthropological thought. The second focuses on theological works, especially in their direct or indirect influence on religious communities and the transmission of ideas and practices from the elite to the masses. The third investigates the way theological discourse provides anthropology with key concepts on how to conceive of “the other” as the subject matter of fieldwork ethnography. Carroll (2017) adds another two ways of interaction between theology and anthropology. Relying on Michael Scott's coined term “Ethno-theology,” Carroll speaks of indigenous communities as active producers of theological discourse. One example she provides is how some indigenous communities within Christianity re-imagine and reconstruct their own mythologies from a Christian perspective. The other way concentrates on indigenous theologies as distinct from standard theology and the extent to which they have influenced anthropology.

Recent calls to strike a dialogue between anthropology and theology reflect a feeling of anxiety expressed by some anthropologists who bewail, under serious critiques coming

from theologians like [Milbank \(2006\)](#), their discipline's failure to show others how to find hope independently from religion or at least explore future roles religion could play to remedy the modern world's rampant ailments ([Bielo 2018](#)).

A reciprocal exchange of benefits transpires. While theology helps anthropology rethink its commitment towards the wellbeing of the world ([Robbins 2006](#)), anthropology provides religion with tools in order to upend current hegemonic orders ([Bielo 2018](#)). One is likely to expect a major paradigm shift because of this cross-fertilization. Anthropologists have expressed their openness to rethink their methodologies in order to accommodate religion as a legitimate member of their tribe ([Robbins 2006](#); [Bialecki et al. 2008](#); [Coleman 2010](#); [Fountain and Lau 2013](#); [Meneses et al. 2014](#)). Such a proffered hug is expected to pry open the gates of a self-critical process initiated from outside the discipline. The most illustrious example is [Milbank's \(2006\)](#) critique of secular social sciences as theologies in disguise and inherently nihilistic and violent. His critique has been accepted by [Robbins \(2006\)](#), and [Fountain and Lau \(2013\)](#). However, this tolerance vis-à-vis theology has to be reciprocal and capable of stimulating critical analyses within religious discourses, especially those loaded with exclusivism and violence. There are in fact indications of a new turn in both social sciences and religious studies.

While openness to religion could herald the advent of what [Fountain \(2013\)](#) calls post-secular anthropology, theologians are expected to accept, although painfully, the birth of post-fundamentalist religiosity that [Ghobadzadeh \(2015\)](#) admirably calls religious secularity or secular theology as [Anderson \(2001\)](#) prefers to describe it.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the ongoing conversations about the potentials of an interdisciplinary approach to anthropology and theology. This study is a humble attempt to demonstrate the valuable input theology could bring into anthropology. For this reason, the material used here is selective and in no way indicative of the actual developments in anthropological discourse about Islam.

Theology informs the normative ethos and worldview of societies and, as such, influences the negotiation between the particular conditioned by space and time and the universal that transcends them. In this analysis, I understand theology in a broader sense that includes both the official elitist theology produced by religious authorities and academics and the popular theology that often emerges from the interaction between established religious systems and the religious practices of ordinary people. Popular interpretations of religious symbols and doctrines are inescapable. Religion is omnipresent and informs deeply how individuals and communities conceive of the world and envisage collective identities along confessional lines.

Theological discourses within the three Abrahamic faiths are the artifacts of various interpretive strategies of which the central purpose is the production of religious symbols for public consumption. Whether a theology is systematic, apologetic, or critical, it necessarily addresses a given audience that, in turn, digests its core principles and eventually reproduces them in terms of practices and collective worldviews. Hence, the audience is capable of theological speech ([Smith 2015](#)). Recent scholarship has witnessed a growing interest in the role particular contexts and social experiences play in the process of constructing normative and generalized categories of religious morality, a development called The Ethnographic Turn in Theology and Ethics ([Scharen and Vigen 2011](#)). This turn reflects a general methodology predicated on the centrality of the particular as a starting point in the course of constructing normative categories for human conduct.

In the context of modern Islamic scholarship, one observes a new tendency to revisit some long-established definitions of what Islam is and how to approach its manifestations in different cultural contexts. Central to this new endeavor is the attempt to overcome the pitfalls of essentialist approaches to Islam that presuppose the existence of one true Islam with a unified set of beliefs and doctrines. [El-Zein \(1977\)](#) argues that the juxtaposition of a universal essence of Islam, if any, with the religious experiences of everyday life and the varieties of their modes of understanding brings into question the existence of one true Islam and challenges the premise on which a unified Islam is predicated.

The affinity between religion and society has been a leitmotif within Orientalist scholarship. Goldziher (1981) contends that religion in its abstract form is non-existent. In fact, modern theologians have accepted the general idea drawn from social theories that some social explanations of religious beliefs are possible (Milbank 2006). Theologians who try to understand how certain religious claims fossilize into orthodoxies focus on social contexts and their contribution to promote, channel, and/or suppress certain religious views. This is exactly what some anthropologists suggest. Eickelman (2002, p. 41), for example, maintains, “Good ethnographic work requires a delicate balance between an understanding of text and sociocultural context” or between the study of village or tribal Islam and that of universal Islam (Asad 2009).

Many Islamicists have adopted this anthropological perspective to theology. El-Shamsy (2008), for example, defines the history of orthodoxy in terms of an interaction between ideas, social practices, and social institutions. El-Zein (1977) recognizes the existence of two coexisting types of theology in Muslim societies: One formal, scholastic, static, and already determined in terms of meaning and another that is informal, folkloric, and in a perpetual state of change according to different locales. Das (1984) refers to the works edited by Imtiaz Ahmad to explain that ethnographic research on specific Muslim communities exceedingly lends itself to the idea that observed Islam is plural, contextually contingent, and syncretic albeit founded on one scripture. This tension between unity and diversity has cultivated another tension between two modes of interpreting Islam. They are the theological as opposed to the anthropological (El-Zein 1977). However, the tendency to distinguish between these two undertakings is challenged by the fact that Islam, like any other religion, cannot be adequately understood by completely reducing it to some observable data and glossing over its underlying textual traditions that constitute its essence regardless of the social context in which it is practiced. Hence, an integrated approach appears to be the remedy for the above-mentioned tension because anthropology and theology are complements to each other rather than substitutes.

2. Geertz’s Theology: The Marginal

Doing anthropology in a Muslim locale requires a working definition of Islam. The issue is not the possibility of understanding Islam but how could such understanding escape the intrusion of imposed meanings and projected views? How do we then conceive of Geertz’s relation with Islam? Should we view him as another Orientalist in an anthropologist’s garb or simply as an outsider trying to uncover the meanings of the host culture?

Indeed, (Geertz [1968] 1971) appears to escape the manacles of a hard classification. For Said (1979), Geertz’s works on Islam represent a favorable exception from the prejudiced accounts of Orientalists. He is, Said (1979, p. 326) argues, a man “whose interest in Islam is discrete and concrete enough to be animated by the specific societies and problems he studies and not by the rituals, preconceptions, and doctrines of Orientalism.” Addi (2009) contends that Geertz’s anthropology of Islam does indeed differ radically from the essentialist visions of Orientalism. Ernst and Martin (2010) describe him as a pioneering figure of what they call post-Orientalist approaches to Islamic studies, while Edwards (2005, p. 5) describes Geertz’ views to Islam as an attempt to “rethink the premises of French colonial anthropology.” Others believe that Geertz remains faithful to the Orientalist tradition. Bagader (1993) views him as an extension of classical pre-colonial and colonial Orientalism in a more academic guise. Varisco (2005, pp. 24–25) mentions Mark Woodward’s critique hurled at Geertz’s Javan ethnography being “an elegant restatement and theoretical reformulation of colonial depictions of Islam.” Lukens-Bull (1999) thinks that Edward Said has overlooked the latent Orientalism in Geertz’s work. Whatever the case might be, I believe that Geertz’s views represent a shift towards more balanced and objective approaches to Islam.

Although *Islam Observed* is a book about Islam, it focuses on how Geertz views Muslim attitudes in both Morocco and Indonesia. Ironically, this is, according to Lindholm (2002),

as if a comparison between the cultural biases of the English and French were entitled: Christianity observed. For Geertz ([1968] 1971), the institution of ‘ulama (scholars of religion) is more significant for understanding Islam than the traditions of the founder of Islam. Consequently, Geertz offers a new avenue for theological studies of Islam, which is a kind of an historical theology as opposed to the traditional one. This is demonstrated by the eminent place ‘ulama occupied in post-classical down to pre-colonial Muslim societies. Muslims have regarded them as the trusted interpreters of sharia law, and, thus, it is in them that defending the supposed “true Islam” is vested. Some anthropologists argue, “[t]he Islam of Ulama is highly abstract, formal, and legalistic. Theology, in this sense, is more reflective than popular systems of religious meaning. At the same time, it is less ritualistic and less bound to common sense experience and social action” (El-Zein 1977, pp. 241–42). Not only does this view ignore the social dynamics of religious knowledge and the active involvement of the ‘ulama in effecting positive or negative social changes, but also glosses over what theology, as proposed by Harding (2000), Robbins (2006), and Coleman (2010), might supply anthropology to explore new avenues, namely, the way religious elites contribute to popular thought and shape some specific expressions of cultural formations. El-Zein (1977), commenting on Eickelman’s interpretation of popular Islamic ideology propagated by Moroccan saints, acknowledges the fact that God’s absolute will plays a central role in how Moroccans grant higher meanings to their mundane actions and how human reason assumes a subsidiary place in this God-centered scheme. One notices here an exact concord between the Moroccan popular worldview and the principles of Sunni Ash’ari theology channeled through saints who in turn owe their theological positions to the synthesis between Sufism and orthodoxy laid down by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). El-Zein’s (1977) neglect of theology as an explanatory framework of popular piety issues from his preconceived assumptions about theology being formal and “more reflective than popular systems of religious meaning” (242).

Theology appears in Geertz’s work as a ghost, something an anthropologist must be aware of but ought to overlook. This is explicit in Geertz’s analysis of “baraka” (divine grace). He rightly distances his understanding of the term from the reductionism of Western anthropologists and explores its meanings within a religious worldview that transforms the term into an implicit doctrine (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 44). Indeed, baraka has been a popular concept deeply ingrained in Moroccan collective imagination. For this reason, Geertz ([1968] 1971, pp. 44–45) appears to be hesitant to subsume it under the banner of theology proper owing to its orality and practicality.

Geertz ([1968] 1971) views theology as a speculative field of knowledge detached from practical and oral symbols constructed by ordinary people. In fact, baraka is formulated in a semi-intellectual quarter of Sufism. Muslim orthodox theologians attempted to defend what they believed to be “the true Islam” against Sufi heresies. In order to do so, they had to delineate the limits of contact between the human and the divine. There was a kind of tacit agreement among the ‘ulama that proximity to orthodoxy by the claimants to baraka is the litmus test of their credibility and acceptability.

What theology and anthropology have in common is their description of respective aspects of human experience (Davies 2002). Theologians have recently been familiar with some anthropological concepts, namely, culture, in their search for useful definitions beyond their own discipline (Knoning 2010). Geertz succeeded in influencing theology because of his well-received definition of religion, which gained currency among many existentialist theologians (Asad 1983), especially the theologians of Yale school, who have “made use of Geertz’s approach to articulate their accounts of Christian faith, with George Lindbeck acknowledging that his cultural-linguistic theory of religion is adapted from Geertz” (Knoning 2010, p. 34). The Geertzian definition is also popular among what Knoning (2010) calls the theologians of inculturation.

The point where the paths of anthropology and the humanities converge is the concept of meaning (Knoning 2010). If we take theology to be the ontology of being, and if “being” is nothing but existence in space and time (man) or outside them (God), it necessarily

includes, besides the essence, other accidental or temporal attributes, which bring the essence from its abstract and mental construction into the actual presence of human action. At this level, anthropology, in the Geertzian perspective is an ontology of symbolic action in a sense that action is construed based on fundamental symbols (Ricoeur 1991). Both being and action have meanings not only as consequences but also as rationales and ultimate ends. Theologians agree that there are ultimate meanings behind human actions, which set them apart from animal behavior. Geertz echoes this religious idea in the field of anthropology as he strives “throughout his writings upon religion and culture to express the dynamics of human expressions in ritual and symbol as demonstrative of man’s quest for meaning” (Morgan 1977).

Geertz perceives anthropology as engaging the other in terms of conversation rather than scientific scrutiny (Ricoeur 1991). He explicitly declares that the concept of culture for him is semiotic not scientific (Geertz 1973) and, thus, what is sought by the anthropologist is not some causal laws but meaning through the mediation of interpretation. For this reason, *Islam Observed*, although inspired by fieldwork experience, can comfortably be placed within the boundaries of Islamic studies steeped in textual analysis of semiotic rather than classical tenor. First, Geertz himself adopts an interpretive strategy in which social events, behaviors, ideas, and rituals are nothing but texts (Shankman 1984). Messick (2016) confirms the Geertzian textual trend because he is the one who has initiated a decisive textual turn in anthropology. Second, the bulk of his observations, says Varisco (2005), are mostly about historical matters and taken from the secondary texts listed in his bibliographic notes. Third, the entire interpretive program of Geertz is inspired by an interdisciplinary leaning allowing him to “become an interdisciplinary figure and a major presence at the interface of the social sciences and the humanities” (Shankman 1984, p. 261).

Geertz’s explanation of how ethnography constructs its knowledge and delineates its subject matter faces an epistemological problem. Simply put, how does one assess the results, views, and debates that spring from ethnographic research? Especially when the assessment is carried out by practitioners trained in different disciplines (Geertz [1968] 1971). Ethnography, argues Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. vii), should not be severed from the general framework of human scholarship, and thus, however parochial anthropological concepts are, their worth lies in their contribution to comprehensive concepts. Geertz warns against such interdisciplinary cross-assessment by insisting on a kind of internal consistency according to which parochial anthropological concepts are validated only when tested against the data they come from (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. vii).

Another work on Islam appeared in the United Kingdom in 1968 by the post-World War II paragon of Islamic studies, Montgomery Watt, under the title, *What is Islam?* Both men, Watt and Geertz¹, came to land on the same territory but with different agendas and methodologies. For Geertz, Islam is seen from a different prism, that of its adherents and not its traditions. Nevertheless, *Islam Observed* is a problematic concept as it claims the possibility of a synchronic observation of a historical phenomenon that has been there for centuries. What is the alternative? *Muslims Observed*? Again, this is a problematic statement as it suggests scrutinizing a community for which religion forms only one part of its identity while the primordial aim has always been the understanding of the interaction between Islam and its adherents and how they sustain their faith through a process of symbolic construction and institutionalization. Thus, *Islam Observed* remains useful albeit imperfect. From the perspective of an anthropologist, the traditional structure of Islam is fathomed only at the end of a thorough process of observations, whereas, from the view of the theologian, the traditional structure is the starting point towards a description and later an explanation of historically formulated doctrines within specific social and political contexts. Geertz observes Islam; Watt explains it. The former goes beyond observing to interpreting, and the latter confesses that formally explaining Islam in terms of a belief system is inadequate without understanding the social dynamics that help create the Muslim “vision,” an instrumental term for Watt close to Durkheimian notions (Dynes 1970). Watt agrees with Geertz that no expert on Islam can lay claim to a

comprehensive and an all-inclusive understanding of the subject. Both men like to escape ahistorical generalizations, static categorizations, and rigid formulations. Watt's analysis of Islamic theology is deeply grounded in history in which social factors alter Muslims' views, while Geertz's interpretation of Islam focuses on symbols, metaphors, and institutions that sustain them over the passage of time.

According to Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. vii), political legitimacy in Morocco is based on two contradictory traditions: The Divine Right of Kings and the Doctrine of General Will. These two traditions are fused into a seamless whole. Watt prefers to call them autocratic and constitutionalist (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 76). However, Geertz seems unsatisfied with these appellations (maybe because of his post-colonial sensitivity) and suggests another two appellations: the intrinsic and the contractual (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 76). Here unfolds the importance of classical theology for an anthropological interpretation. This is evident in how Geertz avails himself of Watt's views to make sense of these designations.

Although Geertz recognizes the theological provenance of the issue of political legitimacy in Islam, he dismisses it as marginal to his study (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 77) and emphasizes, instead, other aspects bordering on theology but rooted in what an anthropologist prefers to be central and critical. As a predilection rather than an objective observation, Geertz alters theological concepts with their historical and intellectual sense into a mysterious and enigmatic interpretation of a mentally constructed reality. Glossing over what he believes to be non-critical, Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 77) shifts perspective towards the supernatural, which he considers the seat of political legitimacy for the Alawite Moroccan Sultanate. Historically, all the contenders for authority in Islamdom have justified their claim to authority either by an appeal to a purported blood relation with the Prophet, i.e., the descent from his household (Shī'a), or by the privilege of belonging to the tribe of Quraysh (Sunnis). The Alawites have capitalized on both. While they based their right to power on their descent from 'Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, they distanced themselves from being treated as Shī'a in a society overwhelmingly Sunni. No supernatural powers, as Geertz imagines, were central to the contest towards political leadership.

3. Theology and Anthropology: The Universal versus the Particular

Studying social structures necessitates an orientation towards observed data. This is what Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. vii) calls the parochial understanding as opposed to the comprehensive one. However, the yearning to broaden one's perspective beyond the confines of some particular contexts appears to have lured Geertz into an attempt to make use of his fieldwork observations by testing them against some abstract and general premises he has about religion and reciprocally evaluate these theoretical premises based on empirical data (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. viii).

To draw a convincing picture of the histories of Indonesia and Morocco, Geertz expresses his reliance on both fieldwork information and some general theory about religion and its provenance. For Geertz, anthropology is the science of the particular or the microscopic, but the ultimate purpose lies beyond that. The hope is to "find in the little what eludes us in the large, to stumble upon general truths while sorting through special cases" (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 4). This approach is reminiscent of Redfield's (1955) classic distinction between Great and Little Traditions. However, the unifying ethos of a particular Islamic religious experience in Geertzian view lie in some abstract concepts related to human existence in general (El-Zein 1977) instead of Islamic worldview deriving from Islam's doctrine.

In the case of the two localities studied by Geertz, i.e., Morocco and Indonesia, one notices the relative absence of Islam as a tradition in the Geertzian theoretical model. This is, in fact, due to Geertz's (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 2) emphasis on how social practices support and sustain symbolically some higher order institutions, which in turn give meaning to these practices. Yet, these institutions are, Geertz contends, more important than the religion that produces them (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 3). Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 3) believes that the interplay between social constructs and their respective institutions leads to the

conclusion that Gregory is more important to Christianity than Jesus and that similarly the Institution of the 'ulama is more significant to Islam than Muhammad. Implicitly, Geertz appears to be uncomfortable with the systematic traditions (theology in its broader sense). He observes, but fails to demonstrate, the tension between the religious experience of Moroccans and the Islamic forms and doctrines of religious life (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 17). Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 15) uses the term collision to describe this tension between Islamic tradition and popular piety.

That there is discrepancy between tradition is and how it is practiced is evident. However, to go as far as asserting a kind of constant antagonism between the two remains unwarranted. Gellner (1984) submits to the same dichotomous understanding but rejects any static and constant state of affairs vis-à-vis the above-mentioned conflict. He maintains that these two forms of religiosity, the orthodox championed by the 'ulama and the practical advocated by Saints, have not been always opposites because they have achieved some kind of symbiosis whereby the two styles permeated each other (Gellner 1984; Gellner 1969; Eickelman 1981). Interestingly, Geertz mentions this symbiosis but only at the level of politics, especially the way sainthood and political ambitions coexisted in some Moroccan key figures to give rise to what he calls a warrior saint (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 8).

The explanatory model proposed by Geertz as to how the modes of production and economic systems that prevailed in towns and outside their pale inform their respective types of spirituality and religiosity is sharp and systematic. However, it lacks an essential element that seems to glide unnoticed, which is Islam and the systematic theologies that sprung from it.

Although the term "tradition" is relatively rare in Geertz's book, he relates it to one central question in anthropological inquiry. He avers, "The intriguing question for the anthropologist is how do men of religious sensibility react when the machinery of faith begins to wear out? What do they do when traditions falter?" Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 3) proposes the following thorough answer,

They do, of course, all sorts of things. They lose their sensibility. Or they channel it into ideological fervor. Or they adopt an imported creed. Or they turn worriedly in upon themselves. Or they cling even more intensely to the faltering traditions. Or they try to rework those traditions into more effective forms. Or they split themselves in half, living spiritually in the past and physically in the present. Or they try to express their religiousness in secular activities. And a few simply fail to notice their world is moving or, noticing, just collapse.

The question here is what does Geertz mean by faltering traditions in an anthropological sense? Does this refer to a concrete reality or is it just a matter of linguistic or mental construction? How do we know if a tradition is faltering? How do we distinguish between a faltering tradition and an effective one in order to devise the most appropriate reaction thereto? The answers provided by Geertz appear to encompass all possible reactions. This is what anyone could suggest irrespective of his or her discipline because it is nothing but a hindsight view to what happened in Muslim societies during the colonial and post-colonial period. Therefore, Geertz's view is more descriptive than interpretive and more logical than concrete.

Redfield's (1955) classic distinction between Great and Little Traditions and their relevance to understanding local cultures, peasantry or tribal, takes into account how grand ideas of a civilization impact daily practices and how indigenous and local ideas assimilate and contextualize global ones. In the case of Islam, Redfield (1955, p. 14) relies on Von Grünebaum's discussion of the productive interplay between orthodoxy and homegrown beliefs in Muslim communities. Redfield (1955, p. 17) concludes that this course of analysis will eventually cause anthropology "to meet the textual studies made by historians and humanists of the great traditions." Hence, the anthropology of Islam has to take up the point of intersection between doctrines or traditions and fieldwork data. Asad (2009) argues that to study Islam anthropologically, one should consider the scriptural foundations of the faith, because Islam is simply a tradition.

Some scholars maintain that there has been a strong tendency to downplay the significance of textual Islam in the study of some Muslim communities (Woodward 1988). To overcome this problem, anthropologists are expected to include traditions in their studies as sources of symbolic construction. In other words, they ought to combine the study of Islamic salvation history and the interest in what is called “Muslim studies” (McLoughlin 2007).

To give an example for illustration, I cite Geertz’s (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 54) formulation of some generalized conclusions about the nature of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia. He states,

when we compare the way in which each of our peoples came, on the whole, to develop a particular conception of what life was all about, a conception they called Islamic, to mean rather different things in the two cases. 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.

What Geertz alludes to is the inherent differences between a Moroccan Islam characterized by toughness and zealotry and an Indonesian Islam known for its quietness and sensibility. This essentialist account has only over-idealized two complex realities through the genius of dyadic classifications. It is true that Morocco and Indonesia are two distant places located in the geographical extremes of the Muslim world. However, at the level of religious experience, these straightforwardly differentiated contexts may not lend themselves easily to such an oversimplified essentialism.

The question here is to what extent the semiotics of interpretation deployed by Geertz conjures up some mental constructs and call them reality. What is more compelling as evidence than the perpetrator’s confession? Geertz, elsewhere, takes note of the propensity to violence, which Indonesian political parties (including the Islamic ones) displayed during the fifties and the killings of communist activists at the hand of Muslim youth groups during the sixties (Geertz 1995). Hence, literary-based interpretation of cultural symbols should be supplemented by objective data, textual or concrete. The outcome is, therefore, an amalgamation of experiences conditioned not only by the contrast between opposite mental pairs but also by the comprehensive elements of what Islam is or is not. This is what an engaged anthropology of religion is supposed to work hard on in an attempt “not only to grasp what is true of all religions but what is true *in* all religions” (Rappaport 1999, p. 2. Italics are Rappaport’s).

Although the search for an immutable essence of Islam has been so far a futile undertaking, the submission to a kind of radical relativism ignores the facts of history and doctrine. While a universal essence of Islam remains a utopian fiction, there are general aspects of Islam that are trans-historical, trans-ethnic, and trans-social. The core of Islam is the Book, a divine text that is perceived by anthropologists in terms of how it is semantically interpreted and institutionally applied. Nevertheless, there is another aspect of it seldom recognized: its trans-historical nature that is a constant reminder of Islam’s identity. This is a methodological dilemma, and unless anthropologists resign to the importance the Book in terms of its transcendence, they will lose sight of the significant transformations taking place in Muslim societies. Gellner (2010) states,

[The] transethnic and transsocial quality of the Book is, of course, of the utmost importance in understanding the political life both of Muslim societies and of the expansion of Islam. Even if the sociologists were right in supposing that the divine is merely the social in camouflage, it is a fact of the greatest importance that the camouflage (if such it be) is so rigorously maintained, and hence emphatically ensures the nonidentification of the divine with any one concrete human or social representative of it.

Asad (1983) remarks how a purely semiotic approach could isolate religion from social practices and reduce it to a mere matter of consciousness eliminating the possibility of examining the impact of material conditions and social activities on knowledge and attitudes. Munson (1986) argues that Geertz's account on Islam in Morocco and Indonesia suffers from an overemphasis on outward practices and overt appearances, and, thus, Geertz lends himself to a reductionist understanding that neglects how Moroccans or Indonesians understand Islam. Geertz would like us to think that classical expressions of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia are two mutually exclusive realities. This oversimplified distinction evokes another trichotomic categorization Geertz employed elsewhere to account for the diversity of religious beliefs in Java. Michael F. Laffan hurled the same critique at Geertz arguing that his conclusion that Javanese Muslims embraced three distinct religious beliefs ignores the overarching unity of Islam (cited in Baeq 2014). Although classical Moroccan piety may differ from the Indonesian one, one cannot go as far as to say that one refutes the other, because they are two manifestations of one religious core informed by both the socio-historical contexts and the textual corpus of Islamic traditions.

What is striking in Geertz's narrative, its stylistic charm aside, is the scholarly conventions of writing. Geertz may have intended to record his observations in a literary fashion to involve his readers in his interpretive venture. For this reason, he appended, quite loosely, a thin bibliography at the end of the *Islam Observed* not as references but rather as a platform for his readers to expand their knowledge on the subject. This explains the strong flow of his impressions within a stream of crafty speculations unaided by precise documentation.

Al-Yūsi (d. 1102/1691), in Geertz's view, is a metaphor, a symbol, an image, or a cultural construction reflecting a whole reality of Islam. Perhaps, Geertz ignored al-Yūsi's writings because what he had been looking for is the legendary, the exotic, and the mysterious (what Edward Said lamented as the great pitfall of Orientalism) and not the real, the usual, and the historical. In this, Geertz appears to have failed to live up to the expectations of a grounded methodological strength of anthropology as opposed to theology in the sense that anthropologists, unlike theologians, are able to easily discover and prove lived differences (Robbins 2006). In other words, Geertz's over-interpretation of al-Yūsi as a mere cultural symbol and his virtual neglect of this figure's lived experience inversely mirrors how theologians tend to explain religious symbols in terms of concrete and physical existence against what Ball (1987) calls the popular usage of symbol as distinguishable from reality.

Another reason for this selective and imbalanced view lies in how modern anthropologists categorize the manifestations of Islam as orthodox and non-orthodox. Asad (2009) maintains that this dichotomy has been popularized by two anthropologists of Moroccan Islam, Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner, and by some of their students. What interests us here is the application of this dual Islam to another ensuing dichotomy, that of 'ulama and saints. The former characterizes the puritanical and scriptural religion of the towns, while the latter represents saint-worshipping and ritualistic religion of the countryside. Asad (2009) observes that this dichotomy correlates with the social order and power distribution of two social systems that characterize pre-colonial Morocco. While cities are known for their hierarchical and centralized institutions, the tribes were known for their egalitarian and segmental organizations. In the former, shari'a law as interpreted by the 'ulama serves as the regulating tool of interpersonal dealings, while, in the latter, customs constitute law presided over by saints.

Al-Yūsi is an indisputable representative of the elite of 'ulama. However, he has another side heavily and almost exclusively discussed by Geertz, that of a mystic, saint, or a marabout through whom common sense experiences and symbols of a religious community channel the understanding of the world (the concrete) and doctrines (the abstract). In fact, al-Yūsi stands as a counter-example for Asad's categorization mentioned earlier and defies the biases of Geertz. This figure of the 17th century embodies a new turn in the course of Islamic knowledge in a period that witnessed the emergence of European Enlightenment and the triumphant rise of the scientific paradigm. Not only did al-Yūsi write on and teach

sharia law, a privilege enjoyed by the elite of the *‘ulama*, but he also struggled to revive the study of philosophy and natural sciences in a country where conservative scholars looked with suspicion to any reason-based intellectual exercise (Stearns 2014).

Can theology serve as an explanatory framework for the anthropologist who is concerned with the *what is* (reality) rather than with the *ought to be* (doctrine)? To answer this question, Geertz accounts for the concept of charisma resulting from baraka and how it changed over time from its individualist form to a genealogical one. Quite reasonably, Geertz views this change as representing “the supremacy of the genealogical view of the basis of Baraka over the miraculous; of the proposition that though sainthood is, naturally enough, accompanied by wonders, it is, conveniently enough, conveyed by blood” (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 45). Why did this change occur in the first place? Why has it endured the upheavals of social and political conditions? This observed reality can only be understood when we take into consideration the consolidation of Moroccan spirituality within a melting pot of Sunni theology and other accepted forms of Sufism, forms approved by the *‘ulama* (al-Yūsi is one of them) as orthodox Sunni Sufism.

Geertz was right in discerning a unifying thread running through the fabric of Islam in Morocco. The theological form of Islam, being abstract in nature, was able to leave its ivory tower and confront historical realities. Thus, once Sufism is approved by orthodox theology, it becomes instrumental in the formulation and modification of the worldview of various Moroccan communities.

Sufism, maraboutism, sainthood, and sherifianism have played the role of mediation between the divine and the human, the otherworldly and the mundane, the sacred and the profane, and between illiterate, nomadic, and simple-minded rustics and the basic tenets of abstract Islam (or orthodoxy). However, this mediation must be qualified, as the authority to mediate has to come from somewhere or someone. The source of this authority is rarely tackled by anthropologists who pay little attention to abstract formulations of faith notwithstanding their strong impact on social institutions and their functions. This explains why Geertz was uncritical of Gellner’s exaggeration over the position of saints in Moroccan popular imagination. According to Gellner, as Geertz quotes him, saints are “the Prophet’s flesh and blood. Koranic propriety emanates from their essence, as it were. Islam is what they do. They are Islam.” (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 51). However, Islam, for any believer, is not what saints do because they cannot utterly go against the two fundamental sources of authority (what I referred to earlier as somewhere or someone): Islamic orthodoxy (although not in a very theological strict sense) and the *‘ulama* (although not in a strict traditionalist sense) whom the public view as the spokesmen of that very orthodoxy.

Again, the blood-based charisma that represents the repository for political legitimacy claimed by the Idrisi dynasty cannot be severed from the Sunni/Shii theological formulations of *imāma* (political and spiritual leadership). This is not to say that Idrisi or Alawite dynasty is more or less Shii in a doctrinal sense, but they were, instead, accurate representations of an intensely grounded Moroccan sympathy towards the house of the Prophet and his descendants. In addition to that, Moroccan reaction to the Sunni/Shii schism has had particular traits. The Moroccan response to the bloody clash between the Sunni Caliphates and Shii opposition was less intense than in the center of the Muslim world and thus took a moderate, integrating, and assimilating form.

In the pre-colonial era where Moroccans made sense of their identity through long and bitter confrontations with the West, Islam remained a socially based title for a community wholly divided but remained connected by an invisible hand of an abstract concept of *umma*.

Geertz ([1968] 1971) is of the view that colonial domination brought with it a rebirth of a strong sense of identity. For Muslims, imperialism is nothing but an attack on Islam. Material resources (wool, wheat, and phosphates), being what imperial powers longed to control, were not as essential or even intelligible as Islam in the process of understanding why foreign troops made their way into Muslim lands. Thus, what had been abstract became concrete. Thus, Islam is personified. It is no longer a metaphor but a reality. Therefore, scrip-

tural Islam resurged as a concrete form of a threatened identity. Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 65) describes the rebound of traditionist Islam as the direct reaction to Western domination. Should this assertion be taken as a mechanical cause and effect process? Should external factors always be the critical element to blame for Muslims' internal commotions? Taken at face value, religious change as a particularity of broader social changes usually occurs gradually and is hardly visible to the naked eye. Again, Geertz reformulates old Orientalist views reiterated in various areas of scholarship. Muslims, according to this view, only react to foreign influences coming from the real agent of historical change, the West. Geertz seems to avoid asking real questions about what went wrong with Muslims. Rather, he focuses on what happened to them.

Apparently, the Weberian paradigm quite indirectly obscures the picture. The dislocation of religious symbols in Geertz's parlance echoes well the Weberian demystification of the world brought about by the process of secularization. The result, Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 62) argues, is the rebound of a scripturalist Islam highly skeptical about the validity of a spirituality represented by al-Yūsi. However, why was Geertz so surprised at this change? If al-Yūsi were a zealot, then why would the heirs of his legacy be any different? If Kalidjaga (the introducer of Islam into Indonesia according to Geertz) were so inwardly spiritual, then why would Islamic fundamentalism, caught in strict legalism, take hold with new generations in Indonesia?² Given the sympathetic attitude of Geertz towards his subject matter (Muslims), one may quite reasonably infer that by stressing external factors in the unfortunate resurgence of Islamic legalism or scripturalism, Geertz implies that Muslims are either innocent or passive. They are the victims of the "other" represented by a myriad of planned attacks, of which domination is only one aspect. This view, albeit sympathetic, ignores internal factors pertaining to Islam itself. Studies on the history of Islamic law and theology have demonstrated that legalism and literalism have been salient and ubiquitous in Islamic history since the Abbasid era. The problem with an exclusively anthropological methodology is that it overlooks higher modes of scholarship in favor of observed realities. No community nor any informant is capable of taking the anthropologist through the chasms of legal history or sophisticated debates of theology in order to assist him/her in understanding synchronic realities deeply attached to the past.

4. Geertz and the Theology of Religious Change

Geertz is inclined to reject conventional definitions of religion coming from theology.³ He contends that religion is not divine nor is it some manifestation of divinity in the world but a conception of it (Geertz [1968] 1971, p. 56). Human understanding of the divine is, therefore, a secular phenomenon contingent on space (Islam in Morocco and Indonesia) and time (the evolving of Islam from spirituality to scripturalism). According to Robbins (2006), theology creates its own realities and represents them in terms of data to be used by the anthropologist. Now, a conception of the divine is both divine and secular and thus partly transcends the exigencies of time and space.

Implicitly, Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 62) somewhat agrees with this line of thinking when he points out three causes or processes of religious change: Western domination, the emergence of activist nation-states, and the increasing influence of legalism and scripturalism. The last one will be my focus here not only because of its relevance to theology but also because of its standing as a manifestation of the spiritual change being the outcome of a clash with colonial powers. Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 64) calls it "the clash of selves" given the fact that the confrontation was spiritual. For Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 71), scriptural Islam, representing a movement towards revival and reform, leads to fundamentalism. Within this new atmosphere, Geertz ([1968] 1971, p. 69), perceptibly, considers theology to be the basis for a struggle aiming at reviving, restoring, and reestablishing the glorious past of Islam.

In the Moroccan case, Geertz argues that scripturalism rose as a reaction against maraboutism. This is indeed puzzling as al-Yūsi is both a marabout and a scripturalist. One has to concur with Geertz that the return of Moroccan scholars to salaf (the forefathers

of Muslims) for inspiration and guidance did not divide the religious fabric of the society. The question is why did not the clash of two modes of piety modify Islam in a radical way? The use of anthropological tools alone is a helpless to answer this question. Anthropology is not able to account for realities deeply attached to the past. Theology, on the contrary, is. The clash between scripturalism and maraboutism observed by Geertz is a manifestation of a long-standing tension between shari'a scholars and mystics within Sunni Islam. For this reason, theology and spirituality in Islam evolved along separate trajectories (Nasr 2006).

Another heated debate took place within the territory of theology proper, the clash between Ash'ari scripturalism and Mutazili rationalism. With the help of political power, Ash'arism dominated the religious scene for centuries. Moroccan sultans adopted this school of theology and successfully propagated its precepts among the masses. One of the reasons behind this success is the proximity of Ash'arism to Sufism and sainthood. Both share a resentment towards reason and emphasize God's absolute will and His direct intervention in the world. Thus, "despite its 'anti-intellectualism,' Ash'arism not only became the prevalent Kalām (theology) in the Sunni world but also became combined in certain circumstances with Sufism." (Nasr 2006, p. 131). This synthesis of individual piety and doctrinal orthodoxy found its ultimate expression in al-Ghazālī (Watt 2005), a key figure whose impact on Moroccan religious and political history is, indeed, immense. Al-Ghazālī's integrative religious experience permeated the porous walls of Moroccan culture through other eminent figures like Ibn Tūmart, the founder of Almohad dynasty, who was influenced by Sufism (Crapanzano 1973), and Abū Medyen, a disciple of al-Ghazālī, who is considered the most influential Sufi in the history of Morocco who joined the great Sufi Abdelqādir al-Jilāni, the founder of al-Qādiriyya brotherhood (Crapanzano 1973). Therefore, the war on maraboutism was waged against some of its extreme and heterodox expressions, leaving space for a profound Sufi spirit informed by exoteric subjectivism and Ash'ari theological voluntarism.

5. Conclusions

In this essay, I examined Geertz' views to Moroccan Islam in light of a proposed integration between theology and anthropology. My main argument can be summarised as follows: despite the genius of Geertz in perceptively analyzing different modes of Islamic piety, which reflect the diversity of Islam and in shedding light on the interdependence between modes of economic production, lifestyles, and social construction of collective ethos on the one hand, and the sacred on the other hand, Geertz's Islam observed provides more questions than answers and leaves much to be desired as to how Islam in terms of theology and tradition interact with popular religiosity to generate the Moroccan Islam we now know. Perhaps, the semiotic and symbolic hermeneutics deployed by Geertz have lured him into a reader-centered interpretation wherein the rights of the interpreter have been overemphasized at the expense of the rights of the text. The marginalization of a long history of religious ideas and their impact on social contexts and the focus on some local expressions of Islam have diminished the book's importance to impact the way we see the negotiation of religious authority and power in post-colonial and contemporary Islam. Geertz appears to subscribe to a broader secular perspective based on a dichotomous, conflictual, and dualistic worldview. The local versus the global, saints against the 'ulama, religion and religiosity, Islam of the town and that of the village, Islam of trade and Islam of conquests, and the list goes on. While these pairs indeed exist, their interaction has never been so simple as to adopt a reductionist interpretation of two presumably antagonistic entities. In fact, there is one Islam and unlimited Islamic experiences. There are saints and 'ulama, but many saints were 'ulama, and many 'ulama were saints. Therefore, an anthropological study of Islam ought to incorporate not only what theologians have to say about Islam but also how theological ideals creep into the deep structures of symbolic and cultural meanings venerated by specific communities in order to produce generalizable conclusions, as Geertz hopes.

Briefly, the contribution of Geertzian anthropology rooted in symbolic hermeneutics to religious studies would have been significant if not revolutionary had the focus of analysis been shifted towards how religious ideas are transformed into cultural symbols and how religious traditions permeate the structures of societies to give rise to particular expressions of faith.

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Notes

- ¹ Geertz explicitly reveals his familiarity with Montgomery Watt's views on Islam and particularly theology. In his thin bibliography appended to *Islam observed*, Geertz refers to two books authored by Watt. They are *Islam and the Integration of Society*, London, 1961 and *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh, 1962.
- ² During Suharto's authoritarian rule of Indonesia from 1967 to 1998, the traditional elite of 'ulama grew increasingly conservative in the face of new liberal orientations held by a significant segment of Indonesian youth and intelligentsia. Backed by pro-shar'ia movements and Jihadists in post-Suharto regime, 'ulama engaged in a program of enforcing Islamic laws and countering liberal interpretations of shar'ia law (Hefner 2011).
- ³ One is reminded that *Islam observed* appeared in 1968 two years after the publication of Geertz's article *Religion as a Cultural System* in which he attempted to provide a general definition of religion based on his broader theory of symbolic interpretation and semiotics. Most of his interpretations of Islam in *Islam Observed* depend on this semiotic definition of religion.

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