

Book Review

Toward Islamic Anthropology

by Akbar S. Ahmed, *International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, Virginia, 1986, pp. 79.*

In his short book, *Toward Islamic Anthropology*, Akbar Ahmed addresses two scholarly communities: anthropologists, whose training is based, as he says, on the study of classic sociological works by Western Europeans, and educated Muslim readers whose view of society is based on their study of the Qur'an and classic works in Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy. Being a member of both communities himself, Professor Ahmed is sensitive to the issues that they face. He makes a sincere plea for dialogue between these two communities and puts forward some intriguing recommendations for resolving the disputes that divide them.

Ahmed begins with a discussion of "the science of anthropology." This serves as an exposition of his views on the subject and as a general introduction to anthropology for those readers who are unfamiliar with it. His epistemological position, that anthropology is "a branch of empirical, observational science" (p. 14) which seeks "regularities or general laws" (p. 15) is both sensible and in harmony with the rational Islamic philosophical traditions. In fact, Ahmed argues that "If anthropology is a science . . . using . . . data collected, for value-neutral, dispassionate analysis . . . then [the Muslim scholar] al Biruni [973-1048 A.C.] is indeed an anthropologist." (p. 56) The philosophical realism of both earlier Muslim scholarship and Ahmed's book, which affirms that the social and cultural facts under study have an objective reality, contrasts with the position adopted by "postmodern" ethnologists. Such writers¹ seem to believe that "the ethnographer, like the native, constructs reality" and cast doubt in a nihilistic way on "the reality of ethnography's project altogether."² Ahmed's position, then, is not only acceptable to Muslims but is also a much-needed reaffirmation of the scientific

¹James Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations*, 1 (1983): 118-146; Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

²Fred Meyers, "Locating Ethnographic Practice: Romance, Reality, and Politics in the Outback," *American Ethnologist* 15 (4) (1988): 609-624, p. 610; see also Ashraf Ghani, "A Conversation with Eric Wolf," *American Ethnologist* 14 (2) (1987): 346-366, p. 358.

status of anthropology, one that runs counter to some of the recent fashions and fads in the discipline.

Ahmed's overview of anthropology (pp. 13-50) is a useful introduction that draws heavily on the perspectives of British structural-functional anthropologists such as John Beattie and Raymond Firth. It is clearly written and provides a good summary for non-specialists of some of the many trends in the field. Like any summary, however, it neglects some major figures and recent developments. It is hardly accurate to claim that "contemporary anthropology has produced no major recent work" (p. 31) and so dismiss Bourdieu, Jack Goody, Lévi-Strauss and Sahlins.³ Ahmed is correct, however, in declaring that the discipline is in a state of crisis (p. 31). He quite properly points out that the cause of this crisis is the inadequacy of the approaches that European and American anthropologists established during the first half of this century. These approaches proved unable to account for socio-cultural change (p. 49), were encrusted with the intellectual vestiges of colonialism, (p. 25-28) and were flawed by ethnocentric and Orientalist biases which led to distorted anthropological descriptions of non-European societies (p. 53-55).

Professor Ahmed also addresses the more specific question of how anthropologists have studied Muslim societies. He cites numerous examples of biased writing, in which anthropologists refuse to credit their Muslim subjects with any interest in justice, peace or orderly social life. The most reprehensible illustrations are taken from Crone and Cook's *Hagarism* and Jeffrey's *Frogs in a Well*, both of which are written in a very belligerent tone and which deserve Ahmed's sharp criticism. (pp. 51-55) Generally Ahmed's sharp criticism. (pp. 51-55) Generally Ahmed succeeds in making a simple point: when an anthropologist describes his informants (Muslim or not) in a way that they would find extremely offensive, there is something wrong with the description. Some important truth or insight has been missed. When Barth describes the etiquette of the Baluch as "hollow" and says that their "intimate life" is full of "deceit" and "suspicion" (in Ahmed, p. 54), he has clearly failed to understand the human dilemmas with which the Baluch must deal. Under great stress most human beings may resort to deceptions of various kinds, which, of course, leads to suspicion; but they also struggle to sustain the loftier ideals of community, hospitality and brotherhood when the conditions of their life make this at all possible. By recording only their failures to realize their ideals, Barth denigrates this struggle and provides a one-sided and distorted view of Baluch life. This negative attitude contrasts

³Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, (New York:) Aldine Publishing Company, 1972).

with some of the more tolerant views which my own Arab Muslim informants held. They said, *al-jū' kāfir*, "Starvation is a Non-Believer," by which they meant that hunger will sometimes overcome a Muslim's conscience and compel him to steal or cheat. While these crimes are not to be condoned the Muslim who commits them in such circumstances should be treated with sympathy.

In accord with the insights into human psychology that Islamic traditions such as the preceding one provide, Ahmed proposes the creation of an Islamic anthropology. By this he means "the study of Muslim groups by [Muslim and non-Muslim] scholars committed to the universalistic principles of Islam—humanity, knowledge, tolerance—relating micro village tribal studies . . . to the larger historical and ideological frames of Islam." (p. 56) He points out that most of the negative myths about Muslim societies concern the "status of women" and the supposed "tyranny, anarchy, and despotism of Muslim politics." (p. 58) Scholars concerned with refusing these myths are advised to provide new, more objective data about these aspects of Muslim society. Ahmed suggests that field workers concentrate, not solely on "villages" or "tribes," but on a larger unit of political and social organization, the "district." At this level the local representatives of Islamic governments, religious institutions and educational systems can be better understood. (p. 59) Ahmed also presents a list of projects which he feels would increase the value of anthropology for Muslims and would result in a superior understanding of Muslim societies by anthropologists. One of the most intriguing is his proposal that "the ethnographic and anthropological content from the writings of the great Muslim writers [be] . . . extracted and compiled in a discrete set of volumes." (p. 67)

All in all, this is a valuable book, well-argued and attractively produced. Its only flaws are some minor mistakes in copy editing: there are a few garbled sentences (ex. p. 39, paragraph 3) and some incorrect citations (ex. p. 64, Wolf 1951 *not* Wold; p. 71, J. Beattie *not* H. Beattie). Generally, I would heartily recommend it to both anthropologist and to Muslims who want to learn more about the discipline.

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