

## The Pure and Powerful: Studies in Contemporary Muslim Society

By Nadiyah Abu-Zahra. Ithaca Press, 1997, 320 pp.

While most of the literature on Islam over the past two decades has concentrated on the issue of Islamic resurgence, focusing mainly on the nature and workings of political movements and militant Islamic groups, this book examines instead the beliefs and practices of ordinary Muslim, exploring an intricate web of social relationships involving the 'ulama, government, Islamic institutions, Sufis, and the people living in the rural and city areas of the country.

The analysis demonstrates how in order to further our understanding of Muslim society, we must gather fieldwork data on the relationship of the common person's Islamic practices to those of the Islamic tradition and apply the relevant analytical concepts to examine them. It further challenges the existing ethnography of Muslim society which is not only based mainly on limited empirical data but also conceals issues worthy of study and is, moreover, full of assumptions oversimplifying the nature of the complex social relationships involved. For instance, anthropology implicitly assumes that the "native" is a naive and ignorant person who, as a corollary of this, is ignorant of his own religion. The consequence of this supposition has been that anthropologists who have written on the subject have not found it necessary to examine how the Islamic practices of the common people have been related to the Islamic tradition.

It was also often assumed that the Islamic knowledge of the 'ulama, and their status as the learned ones, somehow separated them from the lives of the common people. Only recently have researchers started studying the effect of their *fatawa* on society and people, little work having been done before on their lives and influence. This work refutes the assumption that the Islamic text is outside society and that the 'ulama are an entity separate from the people.

The author re-examines the view that different societies contain different versions of Islam and points out that this type of thinking does not of itself advance our knowledge of the subject, nor does it offer a viable criteria for

comparing different Muslim societies. What is needed is an investigation into the performance of Islamic actions by people within the context of their prevailing social conditions.

She sees the knowledge of the historical texts and literary sources as invaluable to the work of the ethnographer, enabling him/her to verify the validity of his/her views and directing him/her to the gathering of fieldwork data which would contribute to a greater knowledge and understanding of Muslim societies.

Thus, the studies in this book investigate new areas of Muslim society, relocating Islam to an arena rich with the daily practices, rites, and rituals of the religion. On the basis of the fieldwork data gathered, the author formulates analytical concepts relevant to the data assembled. First, she goes on to demonstrate how the performance of a certain set of Islamic rituals dovetails Islamic prescriptions with social traditions, thereby showing how an analysis which would separate the two would result in a distortion of social realities and obscure any real understanding of Muslim society. The connection people make between their practices and Islamic traditions is crucial for the study of how Islam is variously integrated and practiced in different societies. The author also shows how the assessment of these differences is not possible without consulting Islamic textual traditions, the common denominator among them all.

The book is divided into three parts, each composed of several studies. Part 1 includes two studies. The first, "The Rain Rituals as Rites of Spiritual Passage," illustrates how the purpose of these rituals is to achieve spiritual purification. The rituals performed by children, the rain prayers performed by men, and the final rituals performed by women and girls form an integral whole with Qur'anic vocabulary and Qur'anic concepts, such as divine mercy and divine forgiveness, having been absorbed into the daily language in connection with the issue of rain. The author shows how the Islamic logic behind the performance of these rituals is explained by the Imam in his sermons during the rain prayers; this Islamic reasoning also underlies the rituals as a whole as performed by the people.

The data in this study were gathered during the researcher's fieldwork expeditions to the village of Sidi Ameur in Tunisia in 1965-66, the summer of 1972, and by a visit in January 1984. The fieldwork method used was participant observation, and her analysis was based on a strong knowledge of the original texts and the acknowledged works in Arabic on the Prophet's traditions regarding rain rites. Thus, the data are used to trace the rain rites continuity with the authentic religious traditions, as well as the integration of the traditions by the people in their own culture and language. The author succeeds in

demonstrating how Islamic thought penetrates the popular imagination and illustrates the importance of consulting the original religious texts.

The second study in part 1, "The Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Islamic Rituals," serves to point out that Islam cannot be treated as a mixture of separate bits and pieces: it is an integral whole, with its various dimensions finely integrated. The author goes on to indicate the pitfalls concerning the origins of some Islamic practices. Consulting Islamic textual traditions and using the analytical concepts she had formulated, she demonstrates how the rain rituals and mortuary rites prescribed by Islam have developed in different ways in Egypt and Tunisia and that in order to assess these differences it is essential to consult the Islamic textual traditions and undertake serious fieldwork.

She strongly questions the validity of anthropological work which considers Islam as a constant autonomous entity independent of society and which, consequently, does not examine the interaction between the two. These misconceptions and methodological shortcomings, she claims, have led to a number of misleading conclusions on the part of some well-respected anthropologists. For instance, she argues that the affirmation that in certain societies some Islamic rituals have their origins in Christianity is misleading for it ignores both the theological differences between the two religions and the fact that the similarity of the rites in different Islamic societies is based on the common religious basis of the practice. Though short, this part is full of insights and important critical views concerning the classic anthropological work on Islamic societies, and it is highly important for researchers in the field.

Part 2 is devoted to the study of the annual celebration of the death of al-Sayyida Zaynab (the granddaughter of the Prophet) and forms the bulk of the book.

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken during three research expeditions made between 1986 and 1988. Although the author's work was confined to the women's section of the mosque, she also observed the behavior of the men (the segregation of the two sexes being incomplete) especially during the annual celebration of the *mawlid* as described in detail in the study.

The author's idea was initially to study the letters addressed to al-Sayyida, a process that would have followed in the footsteps of Sayyid 'Uways who examined the contents of the letters sent by people to the shrine of Imam al-Shafi'i. However, after an exploration of the shrine of al-Sayyida Zaynab and after having consulted some colleagues, she decided to change course and conduct instead anthropological fieldwork. She examined how women, artists, the educated elite, and the government's Islamic institutions incorporate the anniversary of al-Sayyida Zaynab in the Egyptian Islamic calendar and how

they all celebrate the anniversary together. Most of the case studies gathered are on women and refer to their material background, the purposes of their visits, how they express their relationship to al-Sayyida Zaynab, and the rituals they perform at her shrine.

The fieldwork data gathered for the study on the performance of rituals at the shrine of al-Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo and on the celebration of her anniversary refute the claims of dichotomies and stereotypes. The data demonstrated how illiterate men and women knew their religion, knew some Qur'anic verses by heart, and were generally acquainted with all the chapters of the Qur'an. Women and men tried their best to act in accordance with Islamic teachings and when in doubt asked the shaykh of the mosque to give them the Islamic rulings on their practices.

The ethnography on al-Sayyida Zaynab also shows that Egyptians in general believe that al-Sayyida Zaynab is the epitome of purity and embodies all the power of motherhood, including the power to heal the sick and alleviate affliction and pain.

Many educated people were shown to share the beliefs of the common people in their view of al-Sayyida Zaynab: poets from different classes and professions expressed these beliefs in poems honoring her; novelists, musicians, and singers were inspired in their writings and music by the place she occupied in Egyptian culture; and Azhari graduates and historians of architecture also expressed their belief in the Egyptian traditions of al-Sayyida. Thus the gap between the educated classes and the common people was shown to be not as wide as the commonly held stereotype would have one believe.

Furthermore, the author claims that the stereotype of women's religious practices being inferior to those of men is based on a misleading analysis formed without ascertaining whether or not the practices referred to had been prescribed by Islam. Anthropologists who accepted this stereotype did not compare the Islamic practices of women from a specific social background with those of their menfolk taken from the same group, and, as they did not consult Islamic textual tradition, the practices of the men they referred to were indeed not superior to those of women but were, in certain cases, as non-Islamic as those of the women. Astonishingly, it was found that during the celebration of the anniversary of al-Sayyida Zaynab's death, men behaved more emotionally than women.

By ignoring the stereotype that women do not know much about Islam, the author was able to observe and record women's worship, piety, and performance of the rituals at the shrine of al-Sayyida Zaynab, which in some cases she found to be more serious than those of the men.

Throughout her work the author consulted Islamic literary sources, which enabled her to trace the Egyptian development of the biography of al-Sayyida Zaynab, associating her with Egypt and the Nile. Consulting the Islamic textual tradition also enabled her to examine the integration of Islamic prescriptions into the Egyptian traditions regarding the Egyptian cult of saints.

The researcher also found that the practices and traditions of the Sufis did not constitute a separate entity; men and women followed Shar'iah law as well as practiced Sufism. Moreover, some 'ulama also used Sufi traditions in their arguments to validate the beliefs of the common man in the street. The work on al-Sayyida Zaynab describes people's hardships, their views on law and government, and their decent behavior as well as their shortcomings.

Part 3 of the book focuses mainly on the month of fasting, Ramadan, in Cairo. It demonstrates how the 'ulama's duty to ascertain the onset of Ramadan is intertwined with social ceremony. It also describes the nature of people's worship, the obligatory charity considered a purification for the fasting person, the performance of the rituals and people's interaction with *Dar al Ifta'* (the department of issuing *fatawa* whose 'ulama answer people's queries about their Islamic duties during this month). The study also describes the variation in the social mood and activities which accompany the various stages of worship as the month gradually approaches its end and culminates in the celebration of '*Id al-Fitr*, a feast marking the end of the fasting month. In the month of Ramadan, as on all other Islamic occasions, the social and the religious dimensions are shown to be always integrated. Public festivals (like the anniversaries of the saints) are also expressed in an Islamic idiom and include religious obligations such as the observance of *salawat* (sing. *salah*), retreats in the mosque, and charity to the poor.

In contrast to these, the Egyptian secular celebrations of spring rites remain separate from Islam. They are free from all religious obligations, and in contrast to the Egyptian social tradition of celebrating the anniversaries of saints, which is explained in terms of some Islamic prescriptions, the social origins of celebrating spring, together with its customs, are all attributed to the ancient Pharaonic civilization. The secular celebrations of spring are described in "Spring Rites in Cairo," the last essay of this collection.

Each of the above studies breaks down many of the assumptions and stereotypes implicit in several common anthropological works on Muslim society. The studies reveal the complexity of Muslim society and develop newly formulated analytical concepts which offer the possibility of an accurate understanding of the Muslim society and reveal the intricate web of relationships between its various groups.

The fieldwork data in the book indicate that a great many Islamic prescriptions are thoroughly integrated and absorbed into the culture of the common people, both men and women, both in the city as well as in the rural areas. These people profess Islam and in their worship perform the prescribed duties which apply to all Muslims regardless of the individuals' degree of Islamic learning. They also indicate that the most important channel through which Islamic beliefs and textual traditions are preserved and passed on from generation to generation and to both men and women is the performance of Islamic rituals.

This book fills an enormous gap in our knowledge and understanding of the rites of passage in Muslim societies, the cult of saints and its strong grip on the common people, women's worship and performance of rituals at the shrines of Muslim saints, and the web of relationships involving Islamic institutions with people in celebrating the *mawlid* and performing religious rituals, as well as the parallel existence of secular rituals that draw on pre-Islamic traditions that were allowed to persist within a flexible Islamic cultural environment.

Path breaking and highly sophisticated, *The Pure and Powerful* is an important book for anthropologists, a stimulating work for social scientists, and an enjoyable read for all those interested in furthering their understanding of Muslim societies.

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