Chapter 4

Akbar Ahmed: Discovering Islam

Inside Out

Being Muslim allows me special insights but also places certain constraints upon me.¹

Akbar Ahmed

At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist.²

E. E. Evans-Pritchard

In writing Nuer Religion, one of the classic ethnographic accounts of an indigenous religious system, E. E. Evans-Pritchard concluded that he finally reached a point where anthropology stopped and theology took over. Like most anthropologists, he looked at the other’s religion as a conscious outsider, neither intending to become Nuer in belief nor to compare it truthwise to a predefined true religion of his own. Ironically, he first encountered the animist Nuer of Sudan as a skeptic of his own religion but was so impressed by the power of their ritual that he later converted to Catholicism. Like Evans-Pritchard, most ethnographers working in Islamic societies focus on what Muslims do and say, the cultural ramifications of doctrine, rather than engaging in theological debate or apologetic polemic. No modern ethnographers have been missionaries intent on converting Muslims, but several have been Muslim themselves.

In Discovering Islam, British-trained social anthropologist Akbar Ahmed makes sense of the history and social context of his own religion. Ahmed writes from the conscious bias of a South Asian, extolling the virtues of Pakistani and Indian Muslims from religious icons such as Mawlana Abdul Mawdudi to Urdu poets, a Nobel prize winner, and even the world’s fastest bowler in cricket.³ As an insider Ahmed certainly has insights not available to a nonbeliever, but at the same time, as he recognizes, certain constraints are imposed. The
chief constraint, hardly a novel one, is how to objectively analyze a religion that you accept *a priori* as the true religion. How can a Muslim combine anthropology, which claims to be objective, with theology, which is anything but? Alongside this is the cultural trajectory of the ethnographer himself or herself. How can Ahmed analyze Islam in the abstract across geographical space when his own experience and proclivity point to a certain South Asian version?

The question is not simply whether or not a Muslim can represent his own faith objectively as an anthropological exercise, but if religious faith has a tendency to impinge on scholarship that presumes, on some level, to be scientific. The paradox—for many an oxymoron—of faith-based ethnography has not received much attention in mainstream anthropological journals. It is assumed that anthropology requires setting aside personal beliefs rather than trying to interpret according to a preconceived dogmatic frame. In the late nineteenth century, for example, Christian biologists and geologists needed to transcend the established biblical scenarios of a young earth and the literal dust-bowl creation of Adam and Eve to read the evidence for the evolutionary history of the earth and the human species. To a certain extent ethnographers are faced with a similar scenario in which there often is incontrovertible material evidence to falsify specific religious or spiritual claims. Traveling from the secularized West to a “primitive” society has privileged the sense that the religions being studied are behavioral and symbolic systems rather than accurate scientific and historical renderings of a shared “reality.” Few anthropologists have in fact been tempted to convert to the “native” religions they study; after all, Evans-Pritchard chose the donning of an Oxford don’s wardrobe rather than sacrificing oxen, or cucumber substitutes, on the doorstep of his office. The religion of the other, especially an exoticized other, is something to be explained rather than embraced.

Because Islam is a monotheism closely related to Judaism and Christianity, it is not surprising that an ethnographer might convert to Islam as a result of personal conviction. Bill Young, for example, decided before arriving in Sudan for fieldwork among nomads that he would convert to Islam, with mixed feelings of fascination for the faith and an awareness that being a Muslim would help establish rapport. As some of the Sudanese that he met marveled at the conversion of an American Christian, Young was confronted with a sense of guilt. “I was not certain that I would remain committed to Islam,” he reflects, “and was not even sure what that might entail.” The questions that he had about Islam went largely unanswered while in the field, so he practiced the faith by copying the rituals of the Rashaayda nomads among whom he lived. In the spirit of