Religion and Culture: the Case of Islam

by Carl W. Ernst

Religion and culture are widely used concepts, but surprisingly difficult to define. We are accustomed to thinking of them as natural and universal, but they can be considered provincial. “Religion” does not occur in the Bible, and it is difficult to find an equivalent in the languages of Asia and Africa. Latin-speaking Christians used the term *religio* to mean acknowledging the Creator with reverence, but after the Protestant Reformation, “religions” (in the plural) were seen as rival systems of belief and power. Religions are generally assumed to be like Protestantism, using the same template but with different contents.

In the modern world, religion is defined by the nation-state (the Internal Revenue Service determines which religions are legally recognized in the US). In the more than fifty countries with Muslim majority populations, no two have the same legal system or the same definition of Islam, despite appearances to the contrary. Their separate histories, colonial experiences, languages, ethnicity, and other factors make them different.

This is where culture comes in, the complex of things that people actually do. Abstract religious norms are never found apart from their refraction in a local culture. Although scriptural fundamentalists and Western observers assume that everything comes from the Qur’an, there are vast sectors of life in which Muslims are governed by pre-Islamic institutions, secular colonial structures, and local customs. The new ideological forms of Islam betray their novelty by their unrelenting rejection of long-established local traditions.

Artists in Muslim-majority countries draw upon their own cultural traditions, but they also engage in critical debates, positioning themselves in terms of secularism, feminism, and other global discourses. The performers in the series “Secular/Sacred: A Sufi Journey” are no exception; none of them pretends to represent a global religion, but all of them are deeply engaged in their own cultures. And that is something we can all share.