



Lawrence Rosen.- *Encounters with Islam: Studies in the Anthropology of Muslim Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 219p.

Most Western writings on Islam have been offensive, politicized, and biased, often focusing on the negative aspects of Islamic cultures. These writings have portrayed Western and Islamic relations as conflicting, contributing to the misrepresentation of Islam and the demonization of Muslims. The misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslim societies were exploited by American neo-conservatives after the 9/11 attacks to justify launching destructive wars on two Muslim countries: Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. These conflicts, under the banner of the so-called 'war on terror,' further widened the gap and exacerbated differences between the West and Islam. However, some scholars, notably John L. Esposito and Lawrence Rosen, have endeavored to explore the relationship between Islam and the West through multidimensional and interdisciplinary perspectives. They emphasize that this relationship is complex and multifaceted, involving elements of cooperation, conflict, and social and cultural diversity. Refuting totalizing and Eurocentric narratives on Islam, Esposito and Rosen argue that Arab and Muslim cultures defy simplistic stereotypes and are as diverse and complex as any other cultural group. They assert that historical encounters between Muslim and Western civilizations have been marked by a blend of mutual influence, cooperation, conflict, and cultural exchange since the early medieval era. In fact, these encounters have significantly shaped world history and have been characterized by long periods of both tension and collaboration, with both sides influencing each other in various fields such as politics, philosophy, science, and the arts.

Through the lens of anthropology and drawing on his extensive expertise and scholarly acumen, Lawrence Rosen's *Encounters with Islam: Studies in the Anthropology of Muslim Cultures* (2023) is a scholarly work that delves into the multidimensional interactions between Western societies and the Islamic world. Through his book, Rosen challenges common stereotypes and narrow understandings of Islam, drawing from his decades of experience studying the Muslim world. The book adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore the wide-ranging significance of Muslim art, culture, and law globally. Rosen starts his work by emphasizing that essentializing cultures into stereotypes is unacceptable, and Arabo-Muslim cultures cannot be reduced to singular characteristics and are distinct from other cultures. This sets the tone for the rest of the book, which offers a deep dive into the social, legal, political, and critical dimensions of these encounters. Rosen's book touches upon topics such as the social meanings of Islamic art forms, the integration of tribal

law into Islamic jurisprudence, the significance of gift-giving in Muslim cultures, and the implications of missionary encounters between Muslims and the Western world. Moreover, Rosen critically engages with the works of prominent scholars such as Clifford Geertz and Edward W. Said to deepen the reader's understanding of their perspectives on Islamic societies.

Lawrence Rosen's *Encounters with Islam* is divided into four parts, with a focus on expressive, legal, political, and critical aspects of encounters between Islam and other cultures. In the first part, the author focuses on expressive aspects, particularly the social meaning of an Islamic art form. He sheds light on the significance of Islamic art, particularly the complex geometric designs found in medieval Islamic mosaics, and the various interpretations offered by Western scholars regarding the spiritual and abstract nature of Islamic artistic expressions. Rosen explores quasicrystalline patterns found in Islamic art, particularly the intricate mosaics at the Darb-i-Imam shrine in Isfahan, Iran. He discusses the mathematical complexity and artistic sophistication of these patterns, shedding light on the ingenuity of Muslim artisans in creating designs that predate Western discoveries in quasicrystals. Through collaborations with physicists like Peter J. Lu, Rosen elucidates the innovative approach to design and geometry employed by Muslim craftsmen in the past centuries. It is important to note that this part challenges common Western interpretations of Islamic art by suggesting that the art forms are not simply about pure forms aligning with cosmic reality or disconnection from the physical world. Rather, it emphasizes the ingenuity and creativity of the Muslim artisans in constructing complex geometric patterns that transcend conventional representations. The quasicrystalline patterns in Islamic art are regarded as expressions of a highly advanced aesthetic sensibility and mathematical understanding, challenging stereotypes and recognizing the cultural complexity and sophistication of Islamic artistic traditions. In short, through this part, Rosen aims to subvert Eurocentric interpretations of Islamic art, which often focus on the abstract and spiritual dimensions of the art forms. He questions the romanticized views of Islamic art as purely representational of divine and abstract concepts, emphasizing the historical and cultural contexts in which these artistic expressions were created as well as inviting readers to reconsider their perceptions of Islamic art and opening up new avenues for interpreting and appreciating the artistic heritage of the Muslim world.

Moving on to part II, the author highlights the dangers of essentializing and stereotyping cultures, emphasizing the importance of recognizing variation and diversity as opposed to reductionism. By delving into the significance of law in navigating encounters within and outside Muslim societies, he sheds light on how legal frameworks shape social dynamics and interactions. The chapters "Tribal Law as Islamic Law: The Berber Case" and "The Meaning of the Gift" seem to offer insights into the coexistence of traditional tribal laws with Islamic legal principles and the social significance of gifting practices within Muslim cultures. Additionally,

“Islamic Conceptions of the Rule of Law” likely delves into the interpretation and application of legal frameworks within Islamic societies. In other words, in Part II, the importance of custom as a source of Islamic law, particularly in the Berber case in Morocco, is explored. The interchange between Berber law and Islamic law is also discussed, highlighting distinct legal regimes. Lawrence Rosen digs into Islamic conceptions of the rule of law, challenging common perceptions of legal systems in Muslim countries. He underscores the importance of understanding the historical and cultural contexts that shape legal frameworks, and the ongoing struggles for judicial independence and accountability in the face of corruption and political influence. Rosen also highlights the cultural importance of gift-giving in the Muslim world, portraying gifts not only as material exchanges but as essential social, legal, and political tools that shape relationships, establish bonds, navigate hierarchies, and maintain societal order and cohesion. He explores how gifts are intertwined with trust, conflict resolution, and alliance building, emphasizing their pivotal role in social dynamics and identity formation across various contexts in the Muslim world, particularly in North Africa.

In Part III, Lawrence Rosen analyzes the political landscape by examining anthropological assumptions amidst the Afghan War, the Arab Spring’s impact on Moroccan youth, and the activities of Christian missionaries in Morocco. Through chapters like “Anthropological Assumptions and the Afghan War,” “Aging Out? Moroccan Youth in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring,” and “Missionary Encounters: Moroccan Engagement with the Western Other,” Rosen critiques the American failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, attributing them to a lack of understanding of tribal dynamics in these regions. He also discusses Islamist movements’ political involvement, particularly their views on the monarchy, and highlights the missionaries’ friendly yet unsuccessful attempts to convert Moroccans. Rosen further explores the marketplace’s significance in Islamic culture, especially in the Arabo-Berber context, and how Moroccans were exposed to Western knowledge through missionary encounters before colonial times. This part provides valuable insights into the political dynamics within Muslim societies and their relationships with the Western world.

In Part IV, Lawrence Rosen’s book takes a critical stance, analyzing the works of prominent scholars like Clifford Geertz and Edward W. Said. As it is noted in chapters “Clifford Geertz, Observing Islam” and “Orientalism Revisited: Edward Said’s Unfinished Critique,” Rosen presents a fresh perspective on Geertz’s *Islam Observed* and revisits Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*, providing an unfinished critique that challenges conventional narratives. He believes that Geertz’s perspectives offer significant value to our current comprehension of the Muslim world, acknowledging him as a leading anthropologist known for his insightful studies of comparative Islam. Rosen argues that Geertz’s exploration of the Moroccan marketplace in his *Islam Observed* actually delves deeply into how Islam influences everyday exchanges and shapes the country’s political culture. For him, Geertz’ approach to studying Moroccan Islam goes beyond traditional boundaries like

mosques and Quranic schools, revealing the significance of everyday interactions and conversations in understanding the religion's role in society and expanding the realm of Western Islamic scholarship by focusing on the lived experiences of believers. Rosen also discusses Edward Said's significant impact as a critic of Western scholarship and journalism on the Muslim world. He acknowledges the longstanding debate surrounding the merits and criticisms of Said's critique but suggests that Said's analysis may not have fully addressed certain assumptions held by Western Orientalists. Rosen proposes that by further examining and making explicit these underlying assumptions, a more comprehensive understanding of the academic discourse on the Middle East can be achieved. The objective is not to simply support or criticize Said's critique but to shed light on foundational ideas that have shaped academic engagements with Middle Eastern cultures, aiming to foster a more nuanced and constructive approach to criticism and analysis compared to the confrontational tone often present in Said's work.

While the diversity and depth of ideas present in Rosen's book can be viewed as a strength, it is essential to acknowledge that many of his assertions are subject to debate. For instance, Rosen's claim that Christian missionaries in Morocco lacked political motives is contentious, as missionary activities are historically intertwined with cultural imperialism in various regions worldwide, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The dual nature of the Bible, simultaneously oppressive and liberating, and the historical use of Christianity as a tool of colonization, challenge Rosen's perspective. Another notable criticism of Rosen's work is the perceived lack of cohesion between chapters. Readers may struggle to identify a unifying thread or common denominator connecting the various parts or chapters, potentially leading to a disjointed reading experience where sections are viewed in isolation rather than as components of a cohesive whole.

Despite these criticisms, Lawrence Rosen's *Encounters with Islam: Studies in the Anthropology of Muslim Cultures* remains an insightful anthropological study of Western and Muslim encounters. Rosen's analysis dives into a range of contexts, from fifteenth-century mathematical mosaics in Central Asia to the multifaceted political, economic, and social interactions within and involving the Muslim world throughout history. By examining the intersections of art, law, politics and religion, Rosen paints a vivid and nuanced picture of the Islamic world, challenging readers to transcend simplistic narratives and stereotypes and engage deeply with the intricacies of cross-cultural interactions in our ever-evolving global landscape. Through its exploration of cultural encounters, legal traditions, and social structures within Muslim societies, particularly focusing on the Arabo-Berber world, Rosen's work advocates for a profound understanding of the multifaceted nature of these cross-cultural exchanges and the vibrant diversity of Muslim societies in a rapidly changing global context.

Lawrence Rosen's *Encounters with Islam* emerges as a thought-provoking and comprehensive study of the Islamic world, presented by a seasoned scholar

with a profound understanding of the subject matter. Through meticulous research, interdisciplinary perspectives, and engaging narratives, Rosen invites readers on a journey to explore the complex workings of Islamic art, culture, politics and law, prompting reflection on the complexities inherent in cross-cultural encounters. He challenges narrow understandings of Muslim and Western encounters and dismantles dominant narratives that view Muslim cultures as monolithic. Scholars and students of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, political sociology and anthropology will certainly find the book an essential addition and a valuable resource.

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