

Sadanand Dhume: *My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with an Indonesian Islamist*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2008, 273 pp; A\$ 34.95. ISBN 978 1 921351 40 2 (pb). **Reviewed by Marion Spies, Wuppertal.**

Although the prologue of Sadanand Dhume's book *My Friend the Fanatic* begins in 2002, shortly after the Bali bombings, and its epilogue is from 2007, the book is only based on his travels as a researcher in Indonesia in 2004. Dhume is a journalist from new Delhi, who for some time studied in the United States. Part of the time his travel companion in Indonesia is the Muslim Herry Nudi, managing editor of a fundamentalist Indonesian paper.

Until the Bali bombings Dhume shared what he now considers to be a common mis-conception about Indonesia, i.e. that its Muslims are moderate and that Indonesia's strong Hindu-Buddhist past is still relevant at the beginning of the 21st century. But after the bombings he comes to the conclusion that the old tolerance is giving way to a new orthodoxy and that Indonesia is torn between globalisation – visible as capitalism – and Islamisation. To his mind, Islamism is the stronger force of the two and also responsible for the fact that Indonesia's economy is stagnating. In his book, Dhume wants to show Indonesia's transformation from moderation to Islamisation.

In order to do so, he on the one hand portrays sickening Western decadence, mainly in cities. This description of his visit to a night club in Jakarta is typical:

A makeshift stage on the dance floor below was decorated with naked white mannequins arranged like crash-test dummies, their arms and legs and necks at impossible angles. The cover of Djenar's [the guest of honour's] book, a bright red background with PlayStation [sic] controls superimposed on a blurred pair of breasts, filled a large screen above them. After a few minutes the music died, the red on the screen faded, and an amateur video came on. It began with a man at a urinal, his pants down, his arse partially exposed; then it cut to a long-haired man in a denim jacket seated on a toilet (14).

Dhume generally paints globalisation as decadent behaviour in night clubs, low budget sex for tourists, and Indonesian girls slaving in factories, only too grateful to the sophisticated Westerner (i.e. Dhume) for buying them some lunch. On the other hand, he sketches a narrow Islamic fundamentalism. Throughout the book Dhume maintains the sneering attitude of somebody who is well-educated, comes from a threshold country and is fairly independent. As far as religion is concerned, he repeatedly stresses that he is an atheist (see 149 and elsewhere). Many a time he makes it obvious that he looks down on backward Indonesian society:

We [Indians] could at least claim Nobel-winning economists and Booker-winning writers and legions of engineers with stock options at Microsoft and Oracle. In Indonesia you had nothing, no accomplishment on the world stage to speak of, and only Islam to fill the void. It gave you a glorious history, a great cause, a worthy adversary. Most of all it gave you order: Avoid silk and gold. Teach your daughter how to swim. Stop eating before you're full. If on a motorcycle be sure to greet a walking man first (261).

The last sentences do not exactly convey the impression that Dhume has a clue what religion in general and Islam in Indonesia in particular are all about. This becomes most obvious in those parts of the book in which Dhume wants to expose the fundamentalism of Indonesia. Each time the situations are fairly similar: Nudi travels with Dhume to an Islamic community somewhere in the country and introduces him to its leaders so that Dhume can visit the place and talk to devotees. In this way he gets to meet, among others, an Islamic evangelist and inspects several schools and model villages. The impressions Dhume puts to paper are always almost the same: the students are dumb and indoctrinated, they only know how to be obedient to faith, the model villages are religious on the outside only.

This is what you repeatedly get:

At my [i.e. Dhume's] request, the teacher agreed to take us on a little campus tour. The school had no basketball or tennis courts, no sports field of any kind and, needless to say, no gym. It supported only two kinds of extra-curricular activity - scouting and first aid training. The solitary computer had broken down, said the teacher, and there was no one to fix it. ('You can still push the buttons, but

nothing happens.')

He showed us the science lab: a couple of ancient globes, a fierce looking plaster model of the human eye (a blue eye) and a handful of beakers on rusted stands. Then he led us to a corner of the school compound, not far from where we had stood by the schoolyard, to a half-built mosque. They had been at work on it for a year, said the teacher. Inshallah, it would soon be ready for use.

Or:

I pondered the large mosque across the narrow street and the smaller one coming up inside the school. While Indians learned computers and maths, Chinese crammed English, and Vietnamese ratcheted up worker productivity in factories, here they were building a little mosque right next to the big mosque (171).

When Dhume interviews those in charge, he always gets stereotypical answers. The reader, however, wonders: not so much about the replies, but rather about the question asked. Yes, 'question' in the singular: as we know, the quality of surveys also depends on the interviewer, and the journalist (!) Dhume only has one stock question; no matter where he is and whom he talks to, he invariably enquires about the imposition of sharia law. It is Dhume who reduces Islam and life in an Islamic society to living under the sharia (cf. 12 and elsewhere). And then he ridicules the almost identical answers he gets: America, the Jews and the Christians are the enemies who want to destroy Islam; living under the sharia means no alcohol, women have to be covered, people have to speak Arabic, evolution is rejected. Granted: those replies are problematic, but what is more problematic is Dhume, who complains that with such backward people no dialogue is possible (cf. 220 and elsewhere).

The last straw is Dhume's attitude towards his "friend the fanatic" of the title: To the reader Nudi seems to be moderate in his views. It is only when Nudi and Dhume stay with a particularly strict Islamic community that Nudi tends to adapt his behaviour to that of the people he is visiting. One might call him a considerate guest, but Dhume brands him as a hypocrite (cf. 193 and elsewhere). But, as far as I can see, Nudi only does not want to offend anybody, he is just observing that people live differently, and is trying to understand why they do so (cf. 258 and elsewhere). What makes me feel uncomfortable with Dhume's judgement is also the similarity

between the title "My Friend, the Fanatic" and Hanif Kureishi's famous screenplay *My Son, the Fanatic* (1997). Uncomfortable, because Dhume's judgement on Nudi clearly shows that he has not understood or cared about Kureishi's message, that he has probably only used a well-known title to cash in on Kureishi's success. Kureishi's message in a nutshell is that no man has the right to judge a religion (cf. Kureishi 336 and elsewhere) and, the other way round, that no religion has the right to judge a man (according to the way he lives, cf. Kureishi 368 and elsewhere). In the last scene of the play, Parvez, the main character and a 'lapsed Muslim', comes to the conclusion: "There are many ways of being a good man" (Kureishi 382). This is akin to Nudi's attitude. It's almost incredible that Dhume missed this point, not only in relation to Nudi, but also to Indonesian Islamists and a possible dialogue with them.

Dhume's second reference to a seminal work makes matters even worse: Fond of name-dropping, he alludes to Clifford Geertz two or three times. Geertz' most relevant work here – not explicitly named by Dhume – is *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968). By mentioning him Dhume probably only wants to remind us that it was mainly Geertz who propagated a liberal Indonesia. And as I understand it, Dhume is under the illusion that by his book he once and for all refuted this view (by painting Indonesia's Muslim society and its economic prospects as bleakly as possible). Frankly speaking, I do not think that he did. I would still stake my claim on Geertz. Let me tell you why: in his book, Geertz repeatedly pointed out that in the long run Islam in Indonesia will be able to survive and perhaps even flourish because the Muslims there are ready for compromises, both with their own traditions and with the West (cf. Geertz 16). So, the West is not only the enemy (as in Dhume), but also a force from which one might learn. By these strategies, Islamic traditions are frequently re-assessed. Such attempts to evaluate one's own (religious) traditions are lacking in Dhume, perhaps have to be lacking in the book of an avowed atheist. But Geertz, on his part, respected Islam for struggling to realize a conception of the divine in the secular world (see Geertz 56). This would also explain the frequent change between a religious perspective and common sense in people (cf. Geertz 110), for which

Dhume censors Nudi so sharply. After reading Geertz, who pointed out that Orthodox Islam is just an aggressive counter-tradition which, after all, has existed since the nineteenth century (cf. Geertz 66-67), one can also not help thinking that Dhume is overly concerned. One has to ask whether his "fanatics" will be of any political, economic or religious consequence in the long run – in spite of the Bali bombings. Last, but not least: Geertz repeatedly stressed that human culture (which, of course, includes religion) does not consist so much in customs and institutions as in the "interpretations the members of a society apply to their experience, the constructions they put upon the events through which they live" (Geertz 90). But Dhume only writes about the surface of people's lives, i.e. customs and institutions, and does not make sense of what he sees. Therefore, to my mind, in his micro-sociology of Indonesia Dhume fails to interpret changes in Islam in general and to come up with something more broadly relevant than a field-study, like Geertz did (cf. Geertz 22, 57 and elsewhere), i. e. Dhume fails to find a scientific explanation why Indonesian culture is changing.

Bibliography

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