
Ritual as Living Interpretation: A Phenomenological Study of Frederick M. Denny's Thought

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Abstract: This study explores the thought of Frederick M. Denny on Islamic rituals through a phenomenological approach. Denny critiques the neglect of performative ritual aspects in Islamic studies, especially among Muslim scholars and Orientalists. He emphasizes that rituals are not merely symbolic actions but living interpretations rooted in sacred space, time, and theological significance. Drawing on theories such as Sacred Space and Time, Topocoscism, and Rites of Passage, Denny provides a comprehensive framework to understand Islamic ritual practices more deeply. His criticism of previous scholars such as Nadel and his engagement with figures like Snouck Hurgronje and Clifford Geertz highlights the importance of integrating textual sources with contextual performance in ritual analysis. This study finds that Denny's contributions offer significant potential to bridge the gap between normative doctrine and lived religious practices in Muslim societies. His emphasis on the Qur'anic recitation and zakat as sacramental and socio-economic rituals further underlines the richness and complexity of ritual life in Islam. The study advocates for a more appreciative, critical, and scientifically grounded approach to Islamic ritual studies.

Keywords: Frederick M. Denny, Islamic rituals, phenomenology, sacred space and time, Topocoscism, rites of passage, Qur'anic recitation, Zakat

INTRODUCTION

All religions recognize rituals, as each religion has teachings about sacred matters. One of the purposes of performing rituals is to maintain and preserve sacredness. Additionally, rituals are actions that strengthen the relationship between the performer and the sacred object; and reinforce group solidarity, fostering a sense of security and mental strength. Almost all societies

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that perform religious rituals are motivated by a belief system. The existence of belief in the sacred gives rise to rituals. Therefore, rituals are defined as strictly regulated behaviors, performed in accordance with certain rules, which differ from everyday behaviors in both their manner of performance and their meaning. When performed in accordance with the rules, rituals are believed to bring blessings, because of the belief in the presence of something sacred. Profane behaviors, on the other hand, are performed freely. (Atang Abd. Hakim dan Jaih Mubarak, 2009: 125-126).

In Islam, rituals are an integral part of a Muslim's faith. (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 157). This is because Islamic rituals are a form of expression of Islamic doctrine. Thus, for a Muslim, the concept of Tawhid is not merely a theological proposition, but also a living reality; it is the "unification" of God through total obedience and submission. In fact, if we examine the issue of dogmatic theology more deeply—even though this is very significant for Muslims—it is unfortunate that it has not received serious attention, especially among Sunni Muslims who are "orthoprax," and has only been given a separate section in a separate field of study apart from fiqh. This shows how dominant ritual aspects are in Islam. (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 158, 170). In fiqh books, rituals also receive very dominant attention. This is because fiqh books always begin their explanations with ritual obligations, paying attention to the four pillars: prayer, zakat, fasting, and hajj. The first pillar, the shahada, is usually not discussed, but simply accepted. The number and explanation of what is required in prayer are always preceded by a detailed discussion of purification, as purity is an inseparable condition of worship. Wudhu itself is a complex process that requires detailed explanation. (Richard C. Martin (ed), 2010: 70).

A number of previous studies have highlighted rituals in Islam from various approaches. For example, Snouck Hurgronje (1931) emphasized the historical and textual aspects in his study of the hajj, but did not reach the symbolic and performative dimensions of Islamic rituals. Clifford Geertz (1968), in *Islam Observed*, portrays religiousness in Indonesia and Morocco in a symbolic and cultural framework, but his approach is more descriptive, not diving into the phenomenological meaning structure of ritual actions. While S.F. Nadel (1954) in *Nupe Religion* describes religious practices ethnographically, but pays less attention to the connection between practices and Islamic normative sources.

Frederick M. Denny proposed a new approach that is more dialogical between text and praxis, between insider and outsider, by utilizing the theory of sacred space-time, topocosme, and rites of passage to understand rites in Islam symbolically and dynamically. However, there have not been many studies that specifically evaluate Denny's thought in depth and systematically, especially in a contemporary methodological context.

From the literature review, the following gaps can be identified: First, the lack of systematic analysis of Denny's theoretical framework in understanding

Islamic rituals, even though the approach has the potential to bridge textual and phenomenological approaches. Second, there is a lack of studies on how Denny's approach can be applied in the context of modern Muslim societies, such as Indonesia, which is full of local religious practices. Third, there is no explicit integration between Denny's theory and contemporary religious studies discourses, such as postcolonialism, symbolic hermeneutics, and lived religion phenomenology (Ammerman, 2016; Orsi, 2011).

This is what seems to have attracted Frederick M. Denny's attention to further study Islamic rituals. For him, this is very important to complement studies on Islam. Frederick M. Denny himself seems to be quite disappointed that Islamists tend to neglect the highly performative aspects of rituals in their studies on Islam (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 158). His reports on this subject offer a number of possibilities for future research and ways of approaching various forms and expressions of symbolic activity in Islamic society. In addition, this new study of ritual is then attempted to be applied to Islam so that it can enrich understanding of themes in Islamic Studies.

This paper attempts to examine Frederick M. Denny's thoughts in greater depth, particularly in relation to the study of rituals in Islamic studies. It is hoped that this brief paper will make a significant contribution to the advancement of scientific and Islamic knowledge in our beloved Indonesia, amen.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach using library research methods. The data used consists of primary sources in the form of Frederick M. Denny's writings: *An Introduction to Islam* (2010), *The Basic Beliefs and Worship Practice of Islam* (2010), as well as supporting academic studies from other thinkers such as Clifford Geertz, Snouck Hurgronje, Nadel, and Theodor Gaster. The data is analyzed using the phenomenological method with a *verstehen* approach to understand the deepest meaning of religious rituals in Islam.

Additionally, content analysis is used to examine the relationship between symbols, actions, and theological meanings in Islamic rituals. This approach helps the author understand the dynamics between the normative texts of Islam and the living ritual expressions in the social practices of Muslim communities.

Research Design

This research design is exploratory-qualitative with the following steps:

1. Inventory of Frederick M. Denny's major works and supporting secondary references.
2. Critical reading of the theoretical framework offered: sacred space-time theory, topocosm, and rites of passage.

3. Review of studies on rituals that have been conducted in modern Islamic studies.
4. Analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, and relevance of Denny's approach in the context of contemporary Islamic studies.

The purpose of this design is to explore how a symbolic and performative approach to ritual can broaden the horizons of Islamic studies and bridge the gap between insider and outsider understandings of Muslim religious practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frederick M. Denny assesses that within the scope of Islamic studies, Islamists' efforts to examine highly performative aspects of Islamic religious obligations appear to be minimal, and they even seem to tend to ignore them. Yet, Islam itself places ritual aspects in a fairly dominant position (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 78-79).

Furthermore, Frederick M. Denny also criticizes research on rituals that is conducted unilaterally, meaning without accompanying analysis of the original sources that form the basis of such ritual behavior. As in his criticism of Nadel's research on the Nupe religion, according to Frederick M. Denny, Nadel's study did not consider how closely the practices aligned with doctrine; Nadel also did not analyze the abstractions from the original sources but merely studied the society and its values (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 73). In fact, a ritual behavior performed by an individual or a group may deviate significantly from what is actually stipulated in the original sources themselves. For this reason, Frederick M. Denny advocates research into the ideal object of ritual behavior, namely ritual behavior as found in the original sources. He also proposes that fuqaha and Islamists share their perspectives, so that in analyzing and interpreting Islamic rituals, they can bring understanding to the actual Islamic context (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 72).

The next issue that concerns Frederick M. Denny is how to objectively and authentically "capture the essence of Islamic rituals." This, of course, also touches on the issue of insiders and outsiders. He raises the fundamental question: To capture the essence of Islamic rituals, must one be a Muslim? To understand a religion, must one belong to or embrace that religion? (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 8-9, 15).

However, for Frederick M. Denny himself, the effort to capture the essence does not necessarily require something drastic like conversion, but it demands sympathy, respect, and openness toward the sources, people, and texts that hold meaning for its adherents. On the other hand, as stated by Fazlur Rahman, being a Muslim does not automatically guarantee that one's explanation and interpretation of Islam will be clear and balanced. Looking at oneself and one's own tradition from "within" is at least as difficult as trying to understand it from the outside (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 73).

Frederick M. Denny's research is important for providing an explanation of religious phenomena related to ideal ritual behavior and evolving ritual practices. Denny's work represents a breakthrough in overcoming the impasse in studies of rituals that have been largely overlooked by scholars of Islam, both among Muslims and Orientalists. The theories he proposes can be utilized by subsequent scholars in analyzing the hidden meanings behind the performance of rituals in religions, including Islam (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 157–158, 173–174).

Frederick M. Denny has reviewed the works of previous researchers, including:

1. Snouck Hurgronje's work on historical studies of the hajj.

A work published several years before Snouck Hurgronje settled in Mecca during the spring and summer of 1885. According to Frederick M. Denny, Snouck Hurgronje's work is an example of Orientalist scholarship traditionally based on texts and presented in an academic context. Everything one wishes to know about the Hajj from an official perspective is available in written sources. In classical Islam, *fiqh* established as positive law did not require *rihlah*, but rather relied on *kitabah* from available texts. Meanwhile, the *rihlah* undertaken by Snouck Hurgronje made it possible to provide a contextual explanation of Mecca and its inhabitants, an “observed Islam” in its early days. Furthermore, according to him, every hajj also requires official sources and belief in the achievement of the perfect performance of rituals as a testimony on the eternal day (C. Snouck Hurgronje, 1931: 85).

2. Clifford Geertz's work, *Islam Observed*.

This work describes the understanding of the conflict between normative and descriptive approaches in behavioral analysis. It also compares and contrasts religion in Morocco and Indonesia. Geertz's work is full of definitive and descriptive explanations (Clifford Geertz, 1968: 87-88).

3. Nadel's work; *Nupe Religion*.

Nadel's work leads readers to the conclusion that interpreting practices related to Islam is not an easy task, even for the most liberal Muslims or the most authoritative scientific researchers (S.F. Nadel, 1954: 11-15). However, Frederick M. Denny criticizes Nadel's work for not considering the extent to which these practices are carried out in accordance with doctrine; Nadel does not examine the abstraction commonly referred to as “official Islam,” but merely describes Nupe society and values, including its religion (Richard C. Martin (ed.), 2010: 71).

The research methodology used by Frederick M. Denny is a phenomenological approach, using *verstehen* to seek an understanding of general patterns and particular patterns (Amin Abdullah, et al. 2006: 19). More specifically, in an effort to understand rituals, Frederick M. Denny uses several

theories: *First*, the theory of sacred space and sacred time, which successfully identifies the dimensions of space and time in rituals. Space and time themselves are universal categories, and there are many ways in which religious people can explain and describe them. For example, the five daily prayers clearly and explicitly demonstrate that the orientation toward sacred time is quite dominant in Islamic rituals (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 169–171). Additionally, the Hajj pilgrimage, which is an expression of liminality and community in the sense of Victor Turner, also explains the existence of a combined orientation toward space and time focused on the center of the world, namely Mecca (Victor Turner, 1969: 94-95). It should also be added that in prayer itself there is a strong spatial orientation toward the qibla, the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca, which focuses on the effort to generate spiritual energy and demonstrate the unity of humanity and its purpose. Thus, it is clear that wherever Muslims perform prayer, they are spiritually at the center of worship (Richard C. Martin (ed.), 2010: 79).

Second, Frederick M. Denny found that the concept of sacred space in Islam differs from that in other traditions, particularly ancient agrarian-oriented religions in the ancient Near East. For this reason, Frederick M. Denny employs the theory of Topocosme, a theory proposed by Theodor Gaster, defined as a complex relationship between the individual, society, time, and location centered around the seasonal cycle within a comprehensive cosmology. This Topocosme theory is divided into two components: the kenosis ritual, “emptying,” and the plerosis ritual, “filling” (Theodor H. Gaster, 1950/1961: 53-55).

The kenosis ritual, “emptying,” depicts and symbolizes the fading of life and vitality at the end of the cycle (i.e., on earth and in its reproduction) and is represented by the Lenten period (the forty days before Easter), fasting, tension, and other expressions of suffering or death. Meanwhile, the plerosis rite, “filling,” depicts and symbolizes the revitalization that occurs at the beginning of a new opportunity and is shown by mass wedding rites, ceremonies for cleansing sins and dangers (both physical and moral), and magical procedures intended to awaken fertility, enjoy the sun, and so on (Theodor H. Gaster, 1950/1961: 53-55).

This theory briefly attempts to divide rituals into two categories, namely: (a) Separation systems based on space and time. (b) A system of separation based on purity and impurity (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 164). Those falling under the first category include prayer, Ramadan fasting, and the Hajj. This is specifically for local rituals, while for kenosis rituals, an example can be seen in the celebration of the 10th of Muharram, particularly as practiced by the Shia community. The second category is exemplified by mass wedding rituals, purification ceremonies, and others as mentioned above. Regarding sacred spaces, this can be seen in the cult of saints, which aims to satisfy certain people's desire to be close to sacred places (Richard C. Martin (ed.), 2010: 80).

The third theory used by Frederick M. Denny in his study of rituals is the theory of Rites of Passage, particularly Arnold van Gennep's model (Arnold van Gennep, 1960: 10-11). As Gennep explains, Rites of Passage consist of several stages: separation, transition, and integration into a new status. Most rites of passage are more "critical" than "calendrical," meaning that these rites fulfill individual needs and typically explicitly present social bonds as a whole, even though this may occur implicitly (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 165). Critical rites of passage that are important among Muslims include aqiqah, circumcision, marriage, mastery of maqam in Sufi practice (tarekat) that accepts khirqah, and recitation of the Qur'an (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 173-174).

In addition, male puberty rites are often calendar-based and critical in nature, symbolizing renewed strength and future leadership for the larger group. Meanwhile, true rites of passage can be seen in ceremonies often performed around circumcision, such as those in Egypt. The liminal stages in such rites may include the acceptance of the purity/authenticity of women's clothing before the change in status that occurs with the cutting of the foreskin.

Furthermore, Frederick M. Denny sees the need for research on the recitation of the Qur'an, which he believes is a rarely studied topic but useful for studies on Islamic rituals. In his view, when the process of reciting the Qur'an is carried out, there is actually a direct and strong relationship between the text and the context. It is not as simple as questioning the correct practice of recitation based solely on knowledge of recitations (*qira'at*) and rules of pronunciation, stopping, and starting (*waqf wa al-ibtidaa'*). It is also necessary and important to question the requirements for the reader, the place of recitation, and the attitude of the listener. For Frederick M. Denny, reading the Qur'an is akin to a sacramental act where the power and presence of God are so close. Unfortunately, he notes that this topic is still rarely studied or researched, despite its significant value for studies on Islamic rituals. Finally, he also emphasizes the need for research on Islamic rituals regarding the topic of zakat, which is the primary obligation of every Muslim. According to Frederick M. Denny, zakat is a form of integrated ritual economic practice that is intertwined with other practices—prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage—and serves as a key that connects various aspects of ritual experience, such as sacred time, avoiding impurity, and community improvement (Frederick M. Denny, 2011: 162).

The scope of Frederick M. Denny's study is the study of rituals, explained using theories borrowed from Theodore Gasper and Arnold van Gennep. The key terms used are: Sacred Space and Time, Topocosme, Emptying (Kenosis), Filling (Plerosis), Rites of Passage, Separation, Transition, and their integration into a new status (Aggregate).

From several writings that are presented quite clearly and explicitly, there are at least several important contributions that Frederick M. Denny has made to scholars of Islamic studies. Among them are: first, Frederick M. Denny helps provide a more comprehensive understanding of ritual studies in Islamic

studies. The concepts of sacred space and sacred time that he presented are very helpful for scholars of Islamic studies, especially in the field of ritual studies, to better grasp the essence of the symbolic activities demonstrated in Islamic society. Second, Frederick M. Denny provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the aspects of rituals that develop in society.

Frederick M. Denny began his writing by describing the academic problems he faced. He then provides a brief explanation of why he chose to study rituals in his research. He goes on to explain the theory of sacred space and sacred time, seeking general and particular patterns in ritual aspects, particularly within Islamic society. He also employs other theoretical frameworks to analyze these ritual aspects, such as Theodore Gaster's *Topocosme* and Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage. Finally, Frederick M. Denny emphasized the importance of studying rituals in relation to the recitation of the Qur'an and zakat as significant yet under-researched topics among scholars of religious studies, particularly those specializing in Islamic studies.

CONCLUSION

As someone with a keen interest in Islamic studies, Frederick M. Denny has demonstrated his seriousness by making a significant methodological contribution to the study of Islam, particularly studies on rituals. What he has provided initially stemmed from his concern over the scarcity of ritual studies conducted by scholars or researchers in the field of religious studies, despite the fact that he believes this is of great importance. In Frederick M. Denny's own view, Islam defines itself not only through its norms but also through its forms of action. And for him, it is better to view the ideas and practices of rituals among Muslims as elements of a system of symbols and actions rather than simply placing them as antagonisms. This seems to be the peak of Frederick M. Denny's academic concern, which requires intensive studies on rituals.

Finally, regardless of who Frederick M. Denny is, anyone who reads his work should always show high appreciation, critical thinking, and scientific rigor. Thus, future studies in the field of Islamic studies are hoped to produce religious studies researchers who can demonstrate appreciative, critical, and scientific attitudes, rather than the opposite—religious sentiments.

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