

Pathways to Contemporary Islam

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Pathways to Contemporary Islam

New Trends in Critical Engagement

Edited by
Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

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*To Shanya Rauther
The Vision to my Eyes
The Beat to my Heart
The Cradle of my Solace*

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Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

Introduction: Constructing Pathways to Contemporary Islam

Mohamad Nawab

The legacies of late eighteenth-century modernization theory are still present in the contemporary study of culture and religion. Based on the unique experience of Europe, modernization, coupled with ideas of civilization, reason, and progress, came to be understood as the antithesis of culture and religion. Seen as an obstacle to the achievement of modernization, religion was separated from the secular space of politics. Secularization, the hallmark of modernity, described a process of social change which implied that, as modernization advances, religion will wither away. Once a powerful authority in political affairs, religion was singled out, privatized and its influence diminished.

The founding fathers of modern sociology, Weber, Durkheim, and Marx saw religion as reducible to more basic factors: for Marx it was of secondary effect to economic causes; Durkheim acknowledged the social origin of religion and its importance in social dynamics; while Weber emphasized the role of the traditional attitudes of Protestantism in capitalist development. In anthropology, Clifford Geertz, the most influential cultural anthropologist at the height of the secularization thesis, did not hold back in predicting the eventual triumph of science over religion.

The most fervent supporter of the secularization thesis, Peter Berger, predicted that 'by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a world-wide secular culture'.¹ He later re-visited his position, realizing that the world is 'as furiously religious as it ever was'.² The theoretical advancements of the time created a deep divide in the sociology of religion between the secular and the religious,

1 Berger, Peter L. *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. Anchor, 1969, p. 3.

2 Berger, Peter L. 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview'. *The New Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2017, p. 2.

as well as the idea of an anomalous resurgence of religion in international politics, whose profound normative authority still affects contemporary research and understanding.

However, with the fall of the modernization theory and following the end of the Cold War, academics observed the increased relevance of religion in world affairs 'as a return to business as usual'.³ Likewise, the separation between religion and politics is deemed as socially constructed. More recent scholarship claims that 'to define the boundaries of the secular and the religious is itself a political decision'.⁴ Also, it sought out to re-examine the uncritical reification of religion as fundamentally distinct from politics.⁵

The crisis of the modernization theory also opened up new avenues for debating a plurality of modernities and secularisms. Seeking to address the Eurocentric bias in the conceptualization of modernity, the idea of multiple modernities⁶ was considered a promising concept advancing a comparative sociology of difference.⁷ The various modernities developing in postcolonial Muslim countries, along with the conceptualization of Islam as a complex civilization force, were taken as vantage points in the criticism of the universal European modernity.⁸ Given the persistence of a religious dimension in social and political life, as well as the reality of religious diversity, secularism was criticized for its normative grip on modernity and the focus shifted to historical processes of secularization that accommodated religious traditions to various extents.⁹ The emergence of the public sphere as a scholarly interest subsequently challenged the privatization of religion. Comparative analyses demonstrated that, far from being secular, the public sphere is rooted in religious traditions.¹⁰

3 Desch, Michael. 'The Coming Reformation of Religion in International Affairs? The Demise of the Secularization Thesis and the Rise of New Thinking about Religion'. *Religion and International Relations: The Report of the Working Group on International Relations and Religion of the Mellon Initiative on Religion across the Disciplines*. (2013), p. 5.

4 Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman. *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 16.

5 Fitzgerald, Timothy. *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

6 Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. 'The Civilizational Dimension of Modernity: Modernity as a Distinct Civilization'. *International Sociology* 16.3 (2001).

7 Arjomand, Saïd Amir. 'Multiple Modernities and the Promise of Comparative Sociology'. In: *Worlds of Difference*. London: Sage, (2013).

8 Hodgson, Marshall G.S. *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.

9 Bhargava, Rajeev. 'How Should States Deal with Deep Religious Diversity?: Can Anything be Learnt from the Indian Model of Secularism?' (2012).

10 Salvatore, Armando. *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam*. London: Springer, 2007.

While the Orientalist legacy that portrayed Islam as incompatible with modernity persists, new attempts to understand contemporary religious transformations build on a critical wave of scholarship from the late 1970s that radically reframed Islam's relation to modernity. Specifically, it emphasized the innovative social practices that often predated the encounter with Western colonial modernity.¹¹ Various volumes trace everyday experiences of modernity and the complexity of contingencies of everyday Muslim lives,¹² and there is a massive re-thinking of the incompatibility between Islam and modernity. More recent scholarly debates engage the variety of modernities inherited in Muslim thought and developing in Muslim societies, together with the complex politics of Muslim self-fashioning. At the same time, there is a growing literature examining the multiplicity that exist in Islam. As Shahab Ahmed eloquently noted, Islam is not simply just a 'religion'. For Ahmed, 'a valid concept of "Islam" must denote and connote all possible "Islams" whether abstract or "real", mental or social'.¹³ In line with Ahmed's assertion, this book seeks to examine the contradictions and contestations that exist within Islam.

It is also imperative to understand how the global flows of ideas and people generate fracture as well as interdependence, how people engage religious and secular spaces, and how new social dynamics negotiate and transform religious practice and identity. *Pathways to Contemporary Islam* complements the debates on the contestation of modernities, by elaborating the modern trajectories of Islam and addressing new trends in critical engagement with intellectual tradition, the intersection of religion and politics, as well as religiosity and moral agency. Following a multidisciplinary approach, the book underlines the historical diversity of Islamic orthodoxies that led to the establishment of various pathways in the practice and role of religion in Muslim societies. Seeking to de-exceptionalize and de-essentialize Islam, the special emphasis on pathways indicates that critical engagement and contestation have always been intrinsic to the history of Islam. There are four sections to the book, each of which addresses aspects of the larger question posed in this book.

The first section of the book, titled 'Historical Trends in Contemporary Perspective', introduces the idea of 'pathway' and traces the historical

11 Masud, Muhammad, ed., *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

12 Soares, Benjamin, and Filippo Osella. 'Islam, Politics, Anthropology'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009).

13 Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

trends that impacted the modern manifestation of Islam or Islams. This section also traces Islam's multitude of manifestations from its origins to key transformations following modernity and colonial capitalism. This section of the book analyses these historical pathways in order to engage with their legacies in contemporary debates about intellectual tradition, political Islam, and reinterpretations of the social and moral dimensions of religion.

In 'Pathways to Modern Islam', Ali Allawi distinguishes between pre-modern Islam and its turbulent modern trajectories, indicating a point of exhaustion in modern Islam manifested by the increased pace of escalation in Shia-Sunni conflict and the increasing influence of the Salafi school of thought. Criticizing the reactive modern reinterpretations of Islam, the chapter calls for a Romantic Movement to challenge new dogmas and their authority which is plaguing the Muslim community. While the Romantic movement itself comes from a particular experience in Europe, the Romantic movement in the Muslim World will continue the tradition of the classical Islamic scholar ibn 'Arabi which will realize the inner dimensions of Islam.

In 'A Theoretical Pathway to Contemporary Islam', Iulia Lumina shifts the analytical perspective to the reception and perception of Islam in Western scholarship. She reflects on the epistemic legacies in the Western study of Islam which often depicted the religion as either intrinsically anti-modern or anachronistic to modernity. The chapter elaborates the transition of Islam from a 'timeless other' to a distinctive trajectory within multiple modernities. The chapter revisits the debate on Orientalism and proposes new ways to understand the contemporaneity of Islamic phenomena at the intersection with market capitalism. This chapter examines the ways in which modernity was theorized in relation to Islam in order to analyse the historical contingency of knowledge production about Islam in Western scholarship. It critically interrogates concepts such as history, civilization, and modernity, in which Islam transitions from a timeless other to a distinctive trajectory within multiple modernities. The chapter revises the relationship between tradition and modernity. It proposes Paul Rabinow's framework of the contemporary to open up non-Orientalist and non-binary approaches to the study of Islam. Overall, the chapter stresses three theoretical propositions: a historical approach to epistemology and analytical tools; the need to recognize Muslims as active agents shaping discourses of Islam; and finally, a conceptual openness to emergent phenomena and interrelations between the traditional and the modern.

The study of Muslim societies and cultures has mainly followed two different paths, that of anthropologists searching for locally distinctive as opposed

to shared characteristics and Islamicists who focused on religious texts and their interpretation at the expense of everyday practice.¹⁴ The assumed normative core of the sacred texts was challenged by emphasizing the 'social life of religious discourse' and how Muslims negotiate their religious life. Once the academic focus shifted towards Muslims' objectification of their religion¹⁵ and agency is recognized in Muslims' articulation of their identity, scholarship on Islam innovated beyond the presumed normative authority of texts. Tradition, once considered an impediment to modernization, is met with critical understanding leading to the reinterpretation of Muslim ethics in modern life.¹⁶ Similarly, the ulama, perceived as the guardians of religious authority and enemies of reform, are recognized to have historically displayed internal criticism.¹⁷

In line with this understanding, the second section of the book, 'Contesting the Islamic Intellectual Tradition', discusses the problems posed and prospects offered by Islamic tradition in addressing some of the contemporary challenges in Islamic tradition.

Ali Unsal's 'A New Approach to Islamic Intellectual Tradition' highlights the historical role of Islamic intellectualism in pushing the Muslim civilization towards new heights in the realms of societal organization, politics, culture, economics, and theology. Ali Unsal calls for a second Islamic renaissance which he notes is needed to rectify the challenges facing contemporary Muslim societies. The chapter explains the legacies of Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy as products of a first Islamic Renaissance. He notes that the Islamic intellectual sciences were shaped by the rich exchange of knowledge between the Hellenic, Byzantine, and Persian civilizations. This exchange also gave birth to a robust site for the synthesis of the apocalyptic and rational sciences, as well as religious and secular arts.

In contrast to Ali Unsal's perspective on the primacy of Islamic tradition to address contemporary challenges, Syed Farid Alatas's 'The Function of Myths in the Justification of Muslim Extremism' argues against the wholesale acceptance of Islamic historical tradition. The chapter analyses

14 Bowen, John Richard. *Muslims through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

15 Eickelman, Dale F., James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

16 Moosa, Ebrahim. 'Muslim Ethics?' In William Schwieker (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, 2005.

17 Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

the function of myths in Islamic historical tradition in society and exposes the dangers of uncritical acceptance of myths in the collective imagination of Muslims. In this sense, historical as well as urban myths may have a common function, that is to justify actions and views that are exclusivist and extremist in nature. Drawing on two popular myths that have been used to justify sectarianism and anti-Semitism, he notes that there is a need for Muslims to approach these traditions with a critical eye. Proposing the methodology of the Ibn Khaldun in studying historical events, Alatas proffers that a re-reading of Islamic tradition is crucial in stemming extremist ideas and orientations.

In 'The Best and Most Trying of Time: Islamic Education and the Challenge of Modernity', Robert Hefner discusses the provision of religious education and traditional schooling. Arguing that extremist madrasas are the exception, he rejects the idea that traditional education breeds extremism. Instead, the chapter highlights positive developments which adopt the innovative work of contemporary renewalists scholars. From calling for knowledge synthesis to using critical methodologies for the critical assessment of myths and finally adopting renewalist scholars in traditional schooling curriculum, this collection of papers demonstrates the dynamism and intellectual efforts that define new approaches to intellectual traditions. The first two sections of the book follow the Contending Modernities' focus on contention, plurality, and negotiation through the contextualization of the various pathways to Islam as well as critical engagements and the reinterpretations of tradition and intellectual thought.

The third and fourth sections of the book contribute to Contending Modernities' focus on current political and social transformations, from strategies to maintain political power and legitimacy as well as the commodification of piety and branding Islam. In this regard, one of the most tenuous challenges in drawing contemporary pathways of Islam is that of religion and politics. The debate on the politicization of Islam has become more complex given its centrality in contemporary debates within Muslim societies. In a paramount analytical turn, Muslim politics started to be analysed as 'the competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions, formal and informal, that produce and sustain them'.¹⁸ Having identified the failure of political Islam,¹⁹ scholars turned their attention to neo-fundamentalist bottom up transformations,

18 Eickelman, Dale F., and James Piscatori. *Muslim Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 5.

19 Roy, Olivier. *The Failure of Political Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

the relegation of Islamic discourses to the civil society,²⁰ self-fashioning piety movements,²¹ and the changing Islamist discourses that presume a post-Islamist turn.²² This led to a divide in the study of Islamist phenomena as happening either on political or cultural grounds which often leads to a limited understanding of the idea. Notably, scholars point out the need to develop new religious orthodoxies²³ that cut through such divisions, as well as taking into account assemblages of Islam and capitalism that capture new emergent phenomena.²⁴ Hence, an emphasis on class and consumption and how they influence new political ethos is crucial in the analysis of political discourse.

In line with this, the third section of the book, 'Beyond the Arab Revolutions: Political Islam Revised', examines the trajectory of Islamist movements against the secular promises of democracy and the particularities of political Islam in the post-Arab Spring context across both the Middle East and Asia. The chapters in this section map out new political strategies to democratic transitions and searches for new forms of legitimacy.

In 'The Failure of Political Islam Revisited', Olivier Roy revisits his important and ground-breaking theory on the failure of political Islam. Asserting that the concept remains relevant in understanding contemporary Islamic movements, Roy examines the trajectories of Islamist movements and the crisis that led to the development of neo-fundamentalism. Drawing on the examples of Islamist parties in the Middle East, he argues that the Islamist objective of establishing the Islamic state is never likely to take place. He notes that Islamism no longer serves as a form of political protest, and that the attainment of democracy is dependent on the acceptance of religious diversity and new forms of religiosity.

In line with Roy's theorization of the failure of political Islam, Saleena Salaeeem asserts in her chapter 'Building Trust in the Democratic Process: the Role of Islamists in Tunisia's Post-Arab Spring Transitional Politics' that the Islamist Ennahda party in Tunisia has renounced its Islamism and

20 Hefner, Robert W. *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

21 Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

22 Bayat, Asef, ed. *Post-Islamism: The Many Faces of Political Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

23 Cevik, Neslihan. *Muslimism in Turkey and Beyond: Religion in the Modern World*. London: Springer, 2015.

24 Rudnycky, Daromir. 'Market Islam in Indonesia'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009).

prioritized consensus building with other political partners, remaining steadfast in strengthening democratic norms in the country. She notes that Tunisia can prove to be an excellent model that Islam and democracy can both thrive, and that the way forward does not have to be a zero-sum game.

In 'Regaining the Islamic Centre? A Malaysian Chronicle of Moderation and its Discontents', Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid chronicles factors contributing to and the implications arising from declining levels of moderation in Muslim-majority societies in the era of global Islamic resurgence by looking at the example of Malaysia, a country more often than not classified by a broad spectrum of observers as a moderate Muslim country. Fauzi postulates moderation here in terms of both the intellectual conception of Islamic doctrine and its practical application as a way of life and of relating to others, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The chapter argues that moderation has taken a beating with the ascendancy of the Wahhabi-Salafi school of thought which has penetrated Malaysian Islamic institutions, a phenomenon made worse by the prevalence of authoritarian structures and paternalistic political cultures in post-colonial Muslim Malaysia. In Malaysia, Middle Eastern-influenced Salafization synergized with ethnocentric aspects of local politics to produce a socio-political environment largely antithetical to the country's pluralist heritage. As a result, this has impacted the position of minorities, minority Muslim sects, and women in the country.

The last section of the book, titled 'Contemporary Spaces of Critical Engagement', examines the embodied practice, moral agency and new forms of religiosity, emphasizing a culture of renewal and progressive interpretations of religion. In line with Ahmed's assertion of the many Islams that exist in contemporary Muslim societies, this section of the book examines ways in which Muslim scholars have both historically and in recent times sought to interpret and re-interpret Islamic jurisprudence in dealing with the challenges of extremism, inter-faith relations, and issues related to women.

In 'Enhancing Dialogue between Religious Traditions: An Islamic Perspective', Osman Bakar proffered that interreligious dialogue and cooperation is key pillar during the Golden Age of Islam which allows for vibrant pluralistic societies, especially of Islamic civilization. The chapter proffers a historical perspective of the various cultural encounters with other religions in Islamic history over different periods and geographical spaces. Against fundamentalist tendencies, it seeks to recover the practice of dialogue and accommodation and explores the prospects of Sufism in informing a peace-driven universal ethic. This is done through the examination of the three geo-cultural and historical settings, namely that of Muslim ruled Iberia, China under the Ming dynasty, and Islam under Mughal rule.

In 'The Ethical in Shari'a Practices: Deliberations in Search of an Effective Paradigm', Ebrahim Moosa explores the relationship between religion and morality, seeking to create a vibrant ethical paradigm based on reinterpretations of *Shari'a* as ethical truth. He provides an overview of innovative conceptualizations of the much contended *Shari'a* by Muslim jurists and intellectuals. Taking the examples of two contemporary scholars of Islam, the Pakistani jurists Muhammad Taqi Usmani and the Qatari based Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi in dealing with contemporary challenges such as the issue of enslavement by ISIS, he demonstrates the use of innovative methods in re-thinking the Sharia'a. In the same vein, he acknowledges the dangerous lack of critical engagement with tradition, acknowledging the need to rethink the Islamic system of faith (*deen*) by drawing inspiration from Muslim thinkers like al-Ghazali, who called for the acceptance of plurality and multiplicity of meaning.

Finally, 'The New Horizons of Piety: Religiosity and Moral Agency in the Modern World' turns to the new politics of Islamic piety and its most visible symbols: women's bodies and veiling practices. Sahar Amer investigates progressive understandings of religion which prioritize social justice, especially in relation to minorities and women's movements, as well as artistic voices of resistance to conservative readings of Islam. This section shows the pervasiveness of Contemporary Spaces of Critical Engagement, from Muslim intelligentsia, to civil society and individual believers who seek to reconcile being modern and religious at the same time.

The reflections offered by distinguished scholars in this book are important contributions to the larger questions facing Muslim societies across different contexts. Their discussion on a variety of timely social and political issues in *Pathways to Contemporary Islam* grounds the relationship of Islam and modernity in a diversity of Islamic orthodoxies and practices, symptomatic of the dynamism and fluidity of Contending Modernities.

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