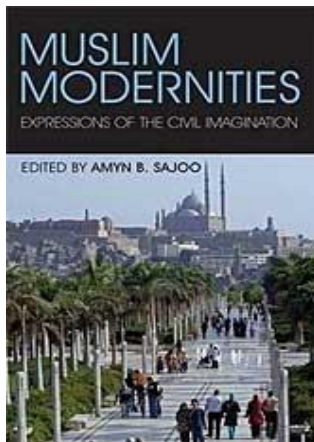




The Institute of Ismaili Studies



Muslim Modernities

Expressions of the Civil Imagination

Edited by Amyn B. Sajoo

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A Reading Guide prepared by Amal Sachedina and Farah Manji for the Department of Community Relations, 2010.

How does Islam engage with the idea of the modern and with the contemporary world? How is Muslim tradition to be reconciled with a world in continuous change? These questions lie at the heart of current discussions on Islam: its doctrines, beliefs and practices. Engaging directly with such questions, this important volume discusses key themes such as identity and citizenship, piety and protest and music and modes of dress. Scholars from a variety of academic disciplines explore how religiosity and tradition may both have an active role to play in the unfolding of what we understand as 'the modern'. Fresh perspectives are offered here on what it is to be both modern and Muslim, mindful of the multiple narratives that inform both identities.



Muslim Modernities includes nine chapters contributed by Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars such as Bruce Lawrence, John Renard and Hasna Lebbady, with an introduction and final chapter written by Aryn Sajoo. The chapters are organised thematically and range from the treatment of subjects such as Scripture and modernity, to discussing the mandate of the Aga Khan Music Initiative and the concepts of citizenship and pluralism, all set within the context of a modernity that extends beyond the West to the Islamic world. A prevalent theme in this volume is the importance of grappling with plural modernities, including cultural and religious diversity, in order to meet the challenges of political violence and the so-called ‘clash of civilisations’.

Guiding Questions:

- What is modernity? Does it necessitate a break with the past?
- Is modernity synonymous with Westernisation and secularism?
- How do Muslims engage with the idea of the modern?
- What does it mean to be a Muslim citizen of a Western state?

Plural Modernities

The author singles out five themes which serve as a guide to understanding the idea of modernity, including modernisation,



Al-Azhar Park in Cairo depicts an alternative view of modernity — a modernity that is also Muslim.

(c) William O’Reilly

and its historical transformation. They include: rationalism; secularism; individualism and human rights; democratic governance; and globalism. Although Sajoo notes that ‘the scientific, industrial and political revolutions that were crucibles in which these themes emerged were Western’ he asserts that modernity is not associated with the West alone but is also part of the contributions of regions beyond Europe. This stress on local and regional forces underpins Sajoo’s interest in alternative *forms* of modernity, not alternatives *to* modernity:

“It is the idea of plural modernities that holds promise, coming to terms with the present yet aware of the ethical and practical limits of the hegemonial narrative”. (p. 11)



A performer in AKMICA's International Performance and Outreach Programme.

He demonstrates that the definition of modernity is itself elusive given that we can no longer subscribe to a singular modernity. Sajoo cites the example of how civil society is often associated with the secular West to illustrate the potential usefulness of the concept of plural modernities. He argues that the Muslim world shares in the value of civic solidarity so it should not be excluded from the narrative of civil society. Understanding modernity in a pluralist perspective thus accommodates this reality. Sajoo also points to the example of the post-September 11th period to demonstrate the limits of secular human rights.

This volume of essays directs our attention to the regional and local histories, contexts and ways of life which shape the specific forms that global

principles of modernity such as democratic governance and human rights, assume in a given part of the world, in this case, the societies of the Muslim World. These essays explore how striving towards modernity has, in fact, led to moral and political realities that do not conform to the Euro-American model. They emphasise the idea of “multiple modernities” in exploring Islam in different societies, brought about by the ongoing struggles to address issues such as practices of piety, political participation and the expression of public identity:

“Formidable ‘other modernities’ can obstruct local ones, as post-Soviet central Asia has found. A socio-spiritual heritage shaped by thirteen centuries of indigenised Islam struggles to find expression today within political boundaries that served Soviet ideology with no regard to ethno-cultural realities. The aim of the Music Initiative (AKMICA) launched by the AKDN in 2000 is a ‘reimagination of traditional Muslim culture within a cosmopolitan and pluralistic Central Asian modernity.’” (p. 16)

These essays are further tied together by the underlying theme of the role of communal ethical dispositions in the making of a Muslim pluralist society.



The key question that informs this work is what is the relationship between the state and the public realm, between religion and politics? There is an acknowledgement throughout this volume of the necessity to promote a multi-cultural ethic through adapting Islamic traditions in line with a more liberal world view. The essays emphasise the dynamism of Islam through an exploration of the use of religious and literary traditions in the public sphere as a means of creating a sense of community and identity which is linked to the past, as well as the development of a civic spirit which is pluralistic in outlook and tolerant in its aims.

Literature as Integral to the Creation of the Modern Public Sphere

Bruce Lawrence addresses this issue through an exploration of the transformation of the nature of debates on Qur’anic interpretation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the British Raj. He reminds us that the advent of British colonial rule in the Indian sub-continent was not merely about superior arms, military organisation and political power. Colonialism also brought about cultural technologies of rule grounded in the logic of science, rational thought and secularisation. The result was a struggle to create a spiritual realm that not only

entailed a religio-cultural identity but led to the formation of a new Muslim subject; one who was in harmony with the demands of modernity. Bryan Turner states that:

“There are actually two troublesome words that confront those who want to make sense of Muslim modernities. One is sharia and the other is secularism. Both sharia and secularism are needed for collective well being or public good (*maslaha*) in the contemporary Muslim world, yet neither is the natural, or easeful companion of the other.” (p. 25)

Lawrence emphasises that the transformation and practice of Islam in the region comes about through the attempts of scholars such as Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Muhammad Iqbal to render the Holy Qur’an compatible with Western science and rationality. Centuries of hadith scholarship are deemed void by Sir Sayyid’s attempts to use rationalist methodology in which miracles for example, have no place in his approach to the Holy Qur’an; the account of Prophet Muhammad’s night journey and his conversation before the Divine Throne are not taken at face value or considered metaphorically. They are regarded as neither physical nor spiritual experiences but are instead relegated to a dream. For



Iqbal, the Holy Qur'an is conceived as a source of foundational principles that can act as a bridge between Islam and the modern world by providing a much needed spiritual foundation to Western material progress. Lawrence places crucial emphasis on how the tradition of Qur'anic interpretation has changed in light of the histories of which it is a part.

John Renard's essay discusses how mythic narratives, folktales and heroic figures become a powerful means of "inculturation", the process whereby individuals learn their group's culture. He states that:

"Across the world, Muslim boys and girls bear the names of Muhammad and Aisha, 'Ali and Husayn, in memory of men and women associated with the beginnings of the religious tradition known as Islam. Ancient as their stories are, characters from a people's past have the power to distil a sense of deeply rooted identity." (p. 51)

Renard emphasises this dynamic of continuity and change, in directing our attention to the ways in which contemporary Muslim leaders have associated themselves through art and political narratives. This is done with figures such as Ayatollah Khomeini as the new Moses, triumphing over the

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The name 'Ali' in Chinese characters.

Pharaonic Shah or Saddam Hussein creating a linkage with the perceived values of the martyred Imam Husayn as part of his attempts to rally support among Iraq's Shia population.

In the context of the specific conditions within which conversion took place in the Muslim world, Renard briefly mentions the efforts by the Malay and the Persians to sensitise certain forms of popular literary genres and hero archetypes to Muslim sensibilities. His primary emphasis is the idea that popular literary and religious traditions become a filter for the transformation of societies as part of the conversion to Islam. This avenue of inquiry opens up a series of tantalising questions on the transformation of literature in the Muslim World that deserve further exploration: What is considered amenable to a Muslim way of life and what is not? How is Islam defined over time in these literary contexts?



The interior view of the prayer hall of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, which was later converted into a Church following the Spanish Reconquista.

(c) Mary Alice Torres, 1990, Courtesy of the Aga Khan Visual Archive, MIT. This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

Hasna Lebbady's essay elucidates upon a literary genre that was once part of the oral story telling tradition among *Mudejar* women (those Muslim women who were forcibly converted to Christianity and then sent into exile from the end of the fifteenth to the seventeenth century after the Catholics conquered Muslim Spain). These narratives became a means of articulating the trauma of exile among women. Its preservation into the modern period becomes a means of creating a sense of communal identity through the conservation and performance of a now marginal literary

tradition in coastal Morocco. For example, the narrative of female identity, entitled 'The Female Camel', relates the process involved in becoming a woman. It includes the stages that a princess undergoes, the first of which is when she is hidden behind the seven *hijabs*.

The re-articulation of a musical tradition is the subject of Levin and Nishanova's chapter, exploring the changes in the institutionalisation of Central Asian music, from the time of the Soviet era into that of the free market economy. As the authors state "In Central Asia, music has traditionally served not only as a marker of social identity but as a means of preserving spiritual practices and beliefs as well as transmitting history, philosophy and ethics." (p. 96) Traditional Central Asian music during the Soviet period was placed within a framework of cultural development in which the Western classical tradition was regarded as the peak. The modernisation of Central Asian music under a Soviet nationalist framework entailed its development according to conventions of European classical music through the use of Europeanised instruments and its governmentalisation under ministries of culture, within the rubric of folklore. The post-Soviet era has witnessed an emphasis on cosmopolitanism where the



development of Central Asian music is now primarily funded by private initiatives and NGOs rather than national governments. Tradition in this context is set within liberal ideals of innovation, creativity and choice while an emphasis on pride in heritage fosters a pluralist ethic. Capitalist networks enable the so-called traditional Central Asian music to become connected to the world music scene. At the same time, globalisation, which has led to displacement and immigration, creates linkages among those displaced to their homelands and communities, through the medium of music.

Islam in the Public Sphere

Nilufer Göle's essay engages our attention towards the social issues that were once thought of as being limited to Muslim-majority countries and which have now become frontal issues in European immigrant settings. Through a controversial lens, that of the headscarf, Göle explores the ways in which the practice of Islam in the public sphere has become a basis for the creation of an alternative modernity. In May 1999, for the first time in Turkey's republican history, the appearance of the *hijab* on an elected Member of Parliament, Merve Kavakci, challenged the very foundations that shape Turkey's public sphere, which



A map showing Turkey at the crossroads of the East and West.

embraces Western secularism characterised by women's equality and liberation and the privatisation of Islam.

Her appearance in this head-dress eventually led to her dismissal. Göle however directs our attention to the ways in which Partesi's very background and appearance defied the common dichotomies of traditional versus modern and secular versus religious that place the modern Turkish subject against its other; the traditional woman who passively and habitually wears a head covering. Instead, Partesi's very appearance projects an alternative modernity where the visibility of Islam in the public sphere is embodied by a Turkish woman who carries all the social signs of modernity including an American graduate education but chooses



The main hope of harmony in our world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted.

Amartya Sen

to wear the *hijab*. The physical appearance of this type of dress together with a liberal ethos of choice and individuality challenges the secular assumption of a modernity that is separate from religion.

Politics and Difference in the Public Sphere

In this essay, Bryan Turner poses a fundamental question on the very nature of creating a multi-cultural society. For Turner, the global outreach of the Islamist piety movement has created groups whose ideals and actions are in contrast to a cosmopolitan ethic. These groups create exclusionary spaces which then inform their actions, such as antipathy to strangers or the maintenance of religious purity through the performance of every day practices such as dress, choice of food and the tightly regulated arrangement of marriage. These practices in turn sediment a set of ethics as part of each Muslim's personhood, which then act as filters with inclusionary and exclusionary criteria creating an alternative set of norms that have little overlap with other groups in a society.

This takes us back to Turner's original question "What is the relationship

between state and society when civil society is an ensemble of separate enclaves?" (p. 156). Turner seeks an alternative form of cosmopolitanism in the ideas of non-Western scholars such as the philosopher and mystic, Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240). Ibn al-'Arabi was particularly concerned about the issue of religious diversity. By exploring Qur'anic teachings that recognise the existence of multiple prophets in different traditions, he wrote that these different religious revelations were all reflections of a divine presence and deserved respect. He rejected the notion that revealed revelation had to aspire to universal rule and instead recognised that diverse communities are best served by their own varied laws and customs. Ibn al-'Arabi also demonstrated the importance of an overlapping consensus between Greek philosophy and the Abrahamic religions and between reason and revelation, thus showing that the rigid contrast between West and East must be questioned.

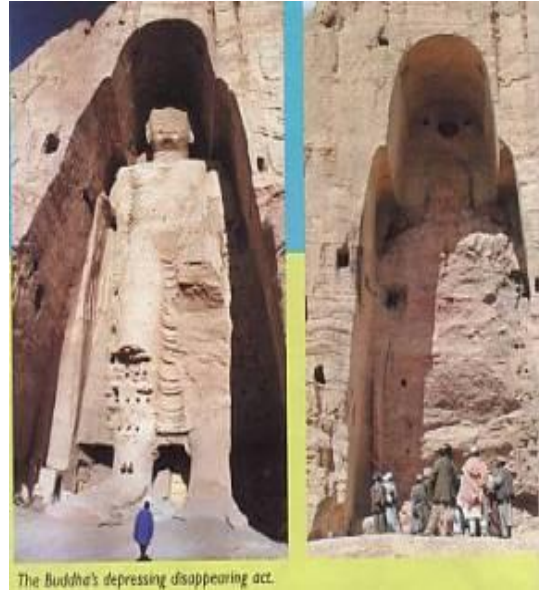
Eva Schubert revisits this paradox and argues that religion and civic engagement, which she conceives as an ethical issue, are not inherently incompatible. Religion for Schubert, has



the potential to create an inclusive sense of community, identity and moral reasoning. She states that virtues of tolerance and cultural diversity integrate immigrants effectively by not demanding that they choose between their history and a new habitus. Conversely, the exclusion of certain aspects of identity from public legitimacy has the potential to alienate. This trend has been marked in Euro-American paranoia about Muslim communities as havens for ‘enemies of freedom’. As the author explains, “to insist that religious loyalties are incompatible with civic identity or that strong religious belief cannot possibly be accompanied by moderate political views, creates the danger that it tries to avoid”; namely, the replacement of reasoning with conformism which tends to have conservative implications. (p. 181)

Critiquing France and Turkey’s secular trajectories of a public sphere that authoritatively denies the presence of all religious markers, Schubert calls for a shared foundation of civic values that allows for the presence of Islam. But some questions remain: Along what lines would Islam be defined by the state in order to render it compatible with the elements of citizenship in a plural civil society? What would need to be included or excluded in such a context?

The nature of Islam in the modern



The Buddha's depressing disappearing act.
Then and now: A gap in a cliff is all that remains of the Bamiyan Buddhas — shown here in 1997 after the Taliban demolished the celebrated statues.

world is taken up by Kevin McDonald’s study of Islamic movements. McDonald argues that there has been a problematic tendency to study Islam in terms of Western secular thought: Islam is either set against modernity, as its other or it is conceived in terms of a relationship between the state, identity formation and politics. These tendencies marginalise the focus on reason and debate in the Muslim world. Moving away from reductionist dichotomies such as cosmopolitan versus fundamentalist, McDonald emphasises that it is important to recognise that contemporary Islam is not merely a reaction to Western domination, but is shaped by various forms of colonial and post-colonial experience. The extent of this interchange underlines how the idea of separate civilisational development is a myth. However, this myth is supported by some countries in the Muslim world and



there appears to be an ‘enforced amnesia’ sweeping through Muslim societies. For example, *The Thousand and One Nights* is banned in Saudi Arabia and Egypt but this amnesia extends to pre-Islamic history as well, as is evident in the destruction of the Buddhas at Bamiyan in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, the forms and reasoning of Islamist movements today cannot be reduced to identity politics or resistance to globalisation. Living Islam as manifested in the Islamic piety movement in Egypt and other parts of the Muslim world may be considered a constituent of another form of modernity; one that cultivates the moral or ethical self as the basis for developing a Muslim virtuosity.

Conclusion

A common thread tying the essays together is the search for an ethical foundation based on the idea of the ‘common good’ that is able to transcend ethno-religious boundaries while encompassing the practice of differing, that is various affiliations of cultural and political identity. This paradox becomes more defined at a time when Muslim piety movements are being reshaped through new global mass media. As Sajoo notes, to perceive ethics in Islamic contexts as no more than a sharia-centric code attached to jihad, is to privilege the

narrowest of interpretations. Even as different Muslim groups rely on a shared corpus (the Holy Qur’an, hadith and texts of Islamic *fiqh*), their own sets of interpretations play a vital role in life in Muslim societies and among Muslim populations in the West. This leads Sajoo in the final essay to call for a reassessment of the idea of a doctrinal separation between religion and the state and the cultivation of a pluralist ethic, which allows for the recognition of civic sharing and empathy that finds expression in common citizenship. Religion in such an arrangement will thus be recognised as a component of political identities instead of a recipe for violence. In effect, Sajoo appears to call for the nurturing of an Islam that would be in agreement with civil life, embracing social citizenship, democratic accountability and nonviolent discourse.

Passages of Interest

A) Multiculturalism, Revivalism and Rituals of Intimacy

Questions

1) Why do women and issues surrounding gender become important in the construction of religious identities? Can you think of examples of how the Holy Qur’an has been interpreted to produce



different analyses of the status of women?

2) How have these ‘rituals of intimacy’ become exclusionary in nature, especially in the post-September 11th context? What are the implications of this and how does it affect the relationship between state and society?

3) With regard to Islam and multiculturalism, do you think that the issues surrounding ethnic diversity are a modern phenomenon or were they always present in, for example, pre-colonial Southeast Asia or in Islamic Spain or in the Ottoman Empire?

Relevant Passages

“While the Holy Qur’an is authoritative as a whole, its content must be applied to particular contexts. What aspect of the Holy Qur’an applies and where? When does it apply and for whom? Why are some but not all passages of the Holy Qur’an of special value at different times and places? And how do changes in context impart special value to particular verses or chapters?” (p. 28)

“One can argue that Islamic norms were originally constructed for the guidance of behaviour in societies that were wholly or predominantly Muslim. With the growth of the worldwide Muslim diaspora, there

is a need to define correct behaviour and expunge ‘foreign elements’ whether these are Western or indigenous folk components.” (p. 151)

Discussion

In this book, we encounter the notion of ‘rituals of intimacy’ which include everyday norms that sustain group identities and also define religious differences. Such codes of conduct regulate how one behaves towards strangers who are not co-religionists and how one maintains religious purity in secular societies. The discussion surrounding revivalism takes place against this background of secular modernity. As a result, we observe a demarcation arising from these rituals of intimacy, a so-called wall of virtue which “allows the believer to follow dress, dietary and sexual codes without secular interference.” (p.156) This is especially observed in immigrant settings and it has become central to the debate surrounding citizenship in countries such as France for example.

B) Religion, Secularism and Civil Society

Questions

1) What is the relationship between modernity and secularism?



2) Can you think of examples from your own contexts of how religious identities and values can play a constructive role in civil society?

3) What is the role of education, both religious and secular, in addressing issues concerning history and identity? Can you think of how programmes such as the Madrasa Early Childhood Development Programme with its integrated curriculum, can help to address the perceived dichotomy between religious and secular education?

Relevant Passages

“It is possible to speak of an excess of secularism, when it becomes a fetish of modernity. In contrast with the formation of the public sphere in the West, characterized initially as a bourgeois sphere that excluded the working classes and women, in Muslim contexts of modernity, women function as a pivotal site in the making and representing of the public sphere.” (p. 130)

“Individuals from divergent ethnicities, cultures, classes and even linguistic heritages can locate a powerful, shared identity around faith-based practices and doctrines. Religious groups and associations foster networks of shared values.” (p. 168)

“Religious identity can and does contribute to national loyalty and civic engagement. Robert Putnam’s study of civic activity in America revealed a definitive link between religious affiliation and broader civic ties. He found that 75 per cent of church members gave regularly to charity, compared with 50 per cent to 60 per cent of non-members.” (p. 171)

Discussion

“Islam has acquired new forms of visibility in the last two decades, as it makes its way in the public avenues of both Muslim and European societies.” (p. 119) Religious symbols in public schools and universities have become a divisive issue both in France and Turkey, provoking a larger debate on secularism. The history of the separation of Church and State can be traced to the seventeenth century and the European religious wars. However, for societies such as those of China, India, South Africa as well as Malaysia, their historical experience of religion and the state is removed from the European and even American experience, where there is a constitutional separation between the Church and State. This highlights the need to open up our readings of modernity to non-Western contexts and reiterates Sajoo’s argument



that the idea of pluralist understandings and experiences of modernity holds promise.

C) Art, Culture and Modernity

Questions

- 1) In what ways can the promotion of cultural heritage engender a pluralistic society? What is the significance of drawing from the historical examples of how Muslim cultures interacted with other cultures, for instance, the adaptive assimilation that characterised interactions with the Greek and Roman cultures following the Muslim conquests?
- 2) How can the heritage of Muslims in the arts be made meaningful in a modern world? How can architecture for example, help to challenge ideological claims regarding tradition and modernity?

Relevant Passages

“A key role in the long-term programme of the Aga Khan Music Initiative is to help local musicians in Central Asia address one of the principal artistic challenges of our time: how to nourish global connections while retaining a link to art rooted in a sense of place and tradition.” (p. 94)

“As Anthony Appiah points out: ‘The connection people feel to cultural objects that are symbolically theirs, because they were produced from within a world of meaning created by their ancestors - the connection to art through identity - is powerful. The cosmopolitan, though, wants to remind us of other connections. One connection is the connection not *through* identity but *despite* difference. We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can fully respond to our art only if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art.’” (p. 117)

Discussion

Modernity is often assumed to represent a ‘rupture’ or break with tradition. However, if we look at the example of the Al-Azhar Park we are able to acknowledge that by serving to shape a wider cultural memory and sense of belonging, it represents continuity rather than rupture. It takes one back to a significant past that includes the Fatimid caliphs, who founded Cairo and Al-Azhar University. It also invokes Muslim civilisations of the past from Cordoba, Marrakesh and Damascus to Isfahan, Lahore and Delhi through the presence of its public gardens. Thus, Al-Azhar Park signifies a modernity that is also Muslim.

In Central Asia, a historic route of trans-Eurasian trade and commerce,



global connections are nothing new. What is challenging is “retaining a link to art rooted in a local sense of place and tradition. For what do ‘sense of place’ and ‘tradition’ mean in the art and music of the 21st century?” (p. 115) On the whole, what is important when looking at this concept of modernity is the need to avoid a binary view, that is, past vs present, science vs wisdom, that too often proves unhelpful. After all, what is significant about the Aga Khan Music Initiative is that it shows that the crossing of musical boundaries of style and genre can also occur in so-called traditional music and that this creativity is not restricted to any musical domain. As expressions of cultural identity, music reminds us that alternative modernities are at the same time ‘both distinctive and overlapping’.

Further Readings

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I fully understand the West’s historic commitment to separating the secular from the religious. But for many non-Westerners, including most Muslims, the realms of faith and worldly affairs cannot be antithetical. If ‘modernism’ lacks a spiritual dimension, it will look like materialism. And if the modernizing influence of the West is insistently and exclusively a secularising influence, then much of the Islamic world will be somewhat distanced from it.

Address by His Highness the Aga Khan
School of International and Public Affairs
Columbia University, 15th May 2006