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Reading Religion and the Religious in Modern Islam

ABDULKADER TAYOB

The “religious” has been a largely neglected dimension of modern Islam. Earlier studies by H.A.R. Gibb and W.C. Smith had explored this aspect to some extent, but a sustained debate had been rendered almost impossible by the sheer vastness of the field, and by the even smaller number of specialists in religious studies. Some persistent dismissals by Muslims of religion as an accurate category for Islam have also hindered such a discussion. And yet, particularly in the last two or three decades, the proliferation of religious codes of behaviour in dress, music, and rituals, has been increasing in almost all Muslim societies. Political mobilization in the name of Islam has stepped up, and seems set to continue in the near future. While the form and motivation for turning to Islam might be changing and highly varied, the religious turn itself remains unmistakable.

Recent developments deserve some critical reflection by those in the field of religious studies. Creative applications of the tools of religious studies are needed to highlight dimensions that have been otherwise neglected or marginalized by the perspectives of other social sciences. A close reading of relevant texts and contexts reveals the usefulness of religion as an analytical category. Looking at Islamic developments through the prism of religion would help, in other words, to reveal the particular transformation of Islam in modern societies and also make possible a positive and critical intervention in political and cultural debates in many parts of the world.

Muslim modernists interpret social transformation

From the nineteenth century to the present, Muslim modernists and reformers have tried to develop a contemporary approach to Islam. Whatever the particular position they finally adopted, they had, in one way or another, tried to make sense of the transformation of their societies and the modern world by engaging in a reappraisal of the meaning of Islam as religion. For almost all of these figures, from Sayyid Ahmed Khan to Afghani to Shariati to Soroush, Islam as religion has been a prominent dimension of this rethinking. Readings of Khan and Afghani suggest that at least two well-established approaches were applied to religion. Khan posited an enduring essence of religion together with changing and dispensable characteristics, while Afghani focused on the social and political pragmatics of religion. In their theories of change, religion played a crucial role. Conscious of the need for reform, the need to respond to European political powers and new intellectual challenges, they both used religion in the abstract as a powerful instrument to think through change. Religion created an opportunity for Khan to posit a new foundation for Islam, and for Afghani to justify revolt.

The study of religion has been divided between those who define religion from essentialist and functionalist perspectives. Similarly, Muslim reformers have been divided between those who view Islam as a function for social and political forces, and essentialists who posit a specific value at the heart of religion. However, what is particularly striking about Muslim reformers is their use of these categories not to understand Islam, but rather to transform it. And this points to the fascinating dimension of modern Islamic reformist discourse: in two different ways, the sociological category of religion has been incorporated into the religious discourse. Khan, who represents the essentialist camp, redefined Islam

On 10 September 2004 Abdulkader Tayob, ISIM Chair at Radboud University Nijmegen, presented his inaugural lecture in Nijmegen on the religious dimensions of modern Islam.

By looking at religion and the religious, he provided a framework for understanding transformations of modern Islam in all sectors of Muslim societies.

as essence in the context of a scientific paradigm that included immutable laws and careful observations. Afghani’s functionalist approach, in contrast, emerged from his political goals and his debate with the critical French public intellectual, Ernest Renan.

The incorporation of religion as a concept into modernist Islamic discourse

cannot by itself determine whether Islamic practice is either essentialist or functionalist. But the very presence of these models in religious (in this case Islamic) discourse helps us to appreciate the nature of modernist Islamic discourse itself. Interestingly, religion as a category has not only served reformers keen on transforming Islamic thought and practice; ordinary Muslims as well have made use of the idea of the secular to redefine the meaning of the Islamically religious. Talal Asad has argued convincingly that the “secular” has been an inseparable twin of religion in modern cultural discourse.¹ Thus, it is feasible that the religious-secular pair provides an analytical category for appreciating the particular division of social life. Modern Muslim discourse usually posits the secular as the antithesis of the Islamic.² It is within this framework that many Muslims have responded to the secularization of social life. By presenting and stressing the secularist as the polar opposite of the Islamic, the secular has come to occupy a key antipode in the Islamists discourse. However, Asad’s thesis of the religious and the secular in a mutual embrace, allows a perception of the secular beyond Islamist discourse.

Ulama and the secular

The ulama organizations have also contributed largely to the formation of this bi-polar discourse. The meaning of the specifically religious has been important for ulama in at least Indonesia, India, and Egypt. In Indonesia and India, they used the idea of the “religious” to articulate their particular role in the society and their particular expertise.³ In Egypt, however, their approach has been more subtle but worth some reflection. Over a period of a hundred and fifty years, the Egyptian ulama presented themselves as a bulwark against harmful modern influences. Over time, they have redefined their role in society and become moral watchdogs over as many aspects of society as possible. Today, this particular form of Islamization of social ethics is regarded as a reversal of the course of secularization in Egypt, but there is more than meets the eye.

Egypt has experienced some major social transformation during which al-Azhar has had to cede its hegemony in the production of knowledge. Through successive phases of reforms, al-Azhar has had to make space for experts in law, modern science, and education. All attempts to transform al-Azhar to respond creatively to these changes have failed in one way or another. But al-Azhar and its chief representatives managed to reconstruct another role for themselves. As the institution ceded more space to secular experts, it maintained the conviction that Islam as a complete way of life could make a contribution to all fields of life. And the only way that al-Azhar ulama could contribute to society in general was to become its moral guardians. The idea of morality was thus both pervasive and limited; nevertheless, it created an aura through which wholesale secularization and secularism were contained. But the moral voice was clearly a religious counterpart of the secular within society. Al-Azhar experts could only make a contri-

tribution to society if they conceded to the secular, and limited their role as the moral overseers of that society, and this is precisely how they could maintain their validity in this discourse. In different contexts, the particular role of the ulama in modern Muslim societies presents us with an excellent example of how the religious and secular mutually define their jurisdictions. The religious and the secular have not manifested as fixed overlays over certain aspects of social life. Rather, the particular political and social contexts determined and guided the articulation of the religious and the secular.

The religious-secular division has a direct impact on the nature of the symbolic in Muslim societies. As an outcome of the division between the secular and the religious, the symbolic has been invested with an excessive religiosity. It is here that the tools of religious studies could also be employed in the understanding of change in Muslim societies. Dress, architecture, food, and landmarks have been invested with diverse symbolic value. On the surface it appears that the religious has had a new lease of life. But the re-appropriation of the religious is never a mimesis. Often it is a dramatic invention. There is no better example of this invention than the role of the modern mosque.

A diverse number of studies have pointed to the rise of the mosque as a prominent site of power and religious significance. In colonial India, for example, the mosque was placed at the centre of Muslim communal identity. It became the symbol of the inviolable right of Muslims. From town planning to religious contestations, Muslim struggles invested the mosque with new significance. They became the pre-eminent sites of resistance against colonial encroachment and communal competition. In some celebrated cases, mosques were even personified in litigation. Sandra Freitag, for example, has pointed to the growing role of the mosque in Muslim public space.⁴ Whilst the mosque was not an overtly political space, it provided a site for authority and symbolic representation in the broader social context. The maleness of the site was equally revealing about the new symbolization. The mosque as site of power, even though limited in relation to the modern state, also revealed a self-conscious gendered dimension. The mosque was pre-eminently a site of male religious and social practice.

The ritual production of the gendered mosque was revealed in the large number of texts on women produced in Muslim societies. Moreover, the gendered dimension was emphasized in the exclusion and marginalization of women in these mosques. Both texts and architecture emphasized the special place for women; mainly in their absence from the main areas of the mosques. Women's absence from the mosque was part of the symbolization of the mosque. While the mosque increased in importance with the decline of political power, and received added emphasis from a renewed religious sector, the exclusion of women became particularly pronounced in the ritual elaboration of this all-male space.

This process of symbolization is one example of how the transformation of religious sites and rituals may be approached to gain an understanding of the changes in the concept of Islam as religion. We can look at the reproduction of religious symbols and practices as creative reproductions. Such an approach might deter some crude anachronisms. More importantly, they will help to understand the deeper struggles and contestations taking place in Muslim societies. The tools of religious studies provide an important medium for thinking about contemporary societies, the Muslim being one example. Religion as an abstract category, contrasted with the secular, as Asad correctly argues, is very much part of contemporary societies. The discourses among Muslims reveal the extent to which these categories are replicated in cultural texts and contexts. The study of religion might serve as an objective tool that will reveal the hidden secrets of incorrigibly religious people. It is, however, an instrument that helps researchers be sensitive to the continually reconstructed nature of societies.

Modern societies seem driven to make and remake themselves in relation to religion and the religious as an organizing principle. Beyond its analytical value, the analysis of religion and the religious in modern Islam also takes the debate within Islam from texts to modern contexts. Both sociological and normative debates about Islam, generally speaking, assume changing contexts for a theology (and law) fixed in pre-modernity. The former have provided considerable insights in the many ways in which Islamic values have been contextualized. African Islam, Asian Islam, or Islams in general are a product of this diversity as seen from below.



PHOTO BY JAN VAN TEEFFELIEN, 2004

On the other hand, there is considerable debate among Muslims themselves about the correct application and re-appropriation of the past in the present. From this perspective, the modernist can be distinguished from the Islamist who is different from the radical, and the ensuing spectrum of other groups in between. While this debate is ongoing and important, it often ignores the transformation of Islam as religion in the modern period. The impact of Muhammad Abduh or Sayyid Qutb on the discourse need not be measured only against a stable body of texts and values. They need to be seen as important contributions to an ongoing contemporary discourse.

Looking at religion and the religious provides a framework for the transformation of modern Islam. And this framework suggests that all sectors of Muslim societies are engaged in the transformation. This perspective avoids the fallacy of viewing some Muslims as stuck in history, whilst others march into the promise of modernity. The religion angle takes seriously the cumulative tradition of modern choices, failures, and successes. Nonetheless, it does not exclude the value of approaching the history of Muslim societies from other critical perspectives. Reading religion and the religious in modern Islam is about making sense of only one dimension of being Muslim in the modern world.

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tember 2004**

Notes

1. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
2. Cf. *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, ed. J. Esposito and A. Tamimi (London: Hurst & Company, 2000).
3. For Indo-Pakistan, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and for Indonesia, Martin Van Bruinessen, "Traditions for the future: the reconstruction of traditionalist discourse within NU," in *Nahdlatul Ulama: Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*, ed. G. Fealy and G. Barton (Clayton, Australia: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1996).
4. Sandra B. Freitag, "The roots of Muslim separatism in South Asia: personal practice and public structure in Kanpur and Bombay," in *Islam, Politics and Social Movements*, ed. E. Burke, III and I. M. Lapidus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).