

Middle East

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The image of the Middle East projected in current public discourses is one imbued with religion. Media consumers would be forgiven for assuming that the region consists of angry bearded men prostrating themselves in prayer when not shaking their fists and burning American flags, and shadowy women with headscarves or chadors. The region is 'the Islamic world', religion stamped on every aspect of its life and function. The 'clash of civilizations' idea, much criticized, remains a potent notion both in the West and in Muslim circles. A mythical totalized 'Muslim world' is opposed to an equally mythical unified 'West', with religion as the essence of the former and the main key to its politics and society.

We are talking about complex and differentiated societies. They comprise political and cultural fields with diverse forces and many contests. Many of the cities in the Middle East have been, and often remain, the locations of cosmopolitan cultures with features of originality. The cosmopolitan Alexandria of past decades may be seen as the creation of foreigners, now long gone, leaving a few architectural traces in a ramshackle poor city bursting with overpopulated slums. But this image hides the native participation in ideas and movements in that city and the genuine mixture of peoples and cultures that prevailed. The foreigners were not just a rich stratum separated from the natives, but comprised proletarian and petty bourgeois sectors, such as Italian dock workers and Greek shop-keepers, intimately intermingled with the native Egyptian urbanites. Cairo was the location of many secular and cosmopolitan cultural spheres. In the 1930s Cairo hosted the Arab music congress in which its musical luminaries, such as Muhammad Abdul-Wahab, argued about the musical renaissance not only with fellow Arabs but also with Bella Bartok. Edward Evans Pritchard was delivering his seminal lectures on primitive religion at the Egyptian, now Cairo University. Are all these elite activities that left the bulk of the population in traditional and religious milieus? Wrong: the flourishing film industry captivated the fancy and imagination of the populace, not just in Egypt but throughout the Arab world, where the current songs were on every lip, and where a faithful audience of urbanites from taxi drivers to porters memorized the dialogue of popular films and gave a running commentary to new viewers. Now this fascination with film is further reinforced by television screens in many homes and cafés, broadcasting soaps, sports, and musical entertainment alongside the religious programmes and moral homilies so characteristic of pious Egypt.

Where was religion prior to its political resurgence in the 1970s? Of course it was there, but in many forms and guises, mixed in with other elements of culture and politics. Of course there were the bearded men of al-Azhar, and different bearded men of the Muslim Brotherhood. The religion of the people, however, was much more relaxed and syncretistic, including music, song, dance, and even exotic substances often frowned upon by the orthodox. Popular rituals and celebration, such as those of the Prophet's birthday and the commemoration of the saints draw vast crowds to the present day. Popular religiosity also mixed happily with other elements of celebratory culture. It is exemplified in the popular song sung by Abdul-Muttalib: *sakin fi hayy al-sayyida wa-habibi sakin fil-husayn, wa-ala shan anul kull al-rida yomat aruhlu marratain* ('I live in the quarter of al-Sayyida [Zaynab] (a shrine district of central Cairo) and my beloved lives in al-Hussayn (another shrine district), and in order to attain maximum

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PHOTO: ALADIN ABDEL NABY, © REUTERS 1998

merit I visit him twice a day'), which situates his love in the sacred geography of Cairo.

Modernity and secularization

'Secularization' is not necessarily 'secularism'. It is not an ideological commitment against religion, but a socio-cultural process by which religion becomes differentiated and separated from other social and cultural spheres, which it previously dominated. In Europe, the Renaissance, the Reformation, then the Enlightenment, and the scientific revolution all contributed to this process, but it was the revolutionary dynamic of capitalism above all that broke up the communities and institutions that enshrined religious domination. In the Middle East, the dynamic of capitalist incorporation was part of Western domination, and was telescoped into a relatively short historical span. A crucial peculiarity of capitalist domination is that it enters into the very economy of desire of bodies and psyches, offering an ever-expanding range of gratifications. These are not only 'material' but often 'spiritual' and intellectual: it engenders new and diverse forms of knowledge and imagination, an ever-demanding curiosity.¹ It demolishes the narrow horizons of community, of kinship, and hierarchical authority by providing means of critical knowledge of the workings of social and political organization. The new middle classes in the urban centres of the 19th and 20th centuries were and remain thirsty for the new forms of knowledge as much as for the material commodities feeding new lifestyles.

The consequence of these developments of modernity was the progressive loss and fragmentation of religious authority. Law was separated from its religious locations in the ulama and their institutions, and assigned to government ministries and courts with personnel trained in secular law schools. Codified state law was largely derived from European models, but even the portion on family law derived from the *shari'a* in most countries became state law under secular legal institutions. Religious authorities attempted to intervene in and control the new cultural spheres of media, publishing, and entertainment, but with only sporadic success largely confined to instances in which items in these spheres directly challenged orthodox truths. The ulama, however, largely acquiesced in the separation of the various spheres of politics, law, and cul-

ture from religion. When religious challenges to these spheres emerged the sources were more likely to be the Islamic militants than the establishment ulama.

The modern sphere, however, did not leave Islam to the ulama, but from the time of Abduh (d. 1905) had attempted to incorporate it into its modern discourses. Ahmad Amin, Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, and Taha Hussein, among others, were Egyptian writers with European education and knowledge of languages. In the 1930s they all wrote books on Islam and its history, claiming the 'real' and pure Islam of the Prophet for modernity, against the obscurantism of al-Azhar and its ulama. In effect, these writers and many that followed them appropriated Islam for modernity and removed it from its traditional contexts of jurisprudence and authority. This is an essentially secularizing step.

Islamism

Islamism also appropriated Islam for modernity, but in a radically different direction. A central element in modern Islamism is the attempt to impose religious *authority* on culture and society. Central quests in this respect are the moralization of public space, the imposition of ritual observance, and the censorship of cultural and entertainment products. Whether in government or opposition (and it straddles both) this strand of Islamism reinforces social control and authoritarian rule and is much favoured by the regimes in the region. This quest coincides with a wider cultural nationalism, seeking the restoration of *authenticity*, which, as always, is constructed. The history of modernity, it is argued, is one of the imposition and invasion of Western culture and institutions on a colonized Muslim society, and it is now time to reverse this invasion by reviving authentic culture. The demand for the application of the *shari'a* is central to this quest. Given that the historical *shari'a* and its institutions are problematic and often irrelevant in a modern state and society, as the Iranian Republic was to discover,² the elements of it which are most clearly at variance with modern sensibilities (dubbed 'Western', but in fact common to many sectors of people all over the world) are highlighted. Thus so-called Qur'anic punishments of amputations, executions, and stoning are adopted by dictators and authoritarian chiefs (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan, the Taliban,

Northern Nigeria), flaunted as Islamic. The irony is that these acts are described by many as 'medieval' barbarism, when in fact medieval jurists and judges imposed many and restrictive conditions on these punishments, and the high standards of evidence demanded by the *shari'a* were hard to satisfy. It is modern dictators who relish their application, both as demonstration of their religious devotion and justice and as intimidation and threat to political opposition.

Similarly, the veiling of women and the prohibition of interest (which means disguising it) and of alcohol become easy hallmarks of Islamicity, when all the institutions of state and society and most spheres of culture have clearly nothing to do with religion, but are products of technical and cultural modernity. One episode illustrates the hollowness of this quest for authenticity. A classic book of medicine by the medieval doctor and philosopher al-Razi³ includes a chapter on wine and its medical qualities, finding its moderate consumption to be largely beneficial. The manuscript of this book was printed in the 19th century, then issued in many successive editions. It was only in a Beirut edition in 1985 that the chapter on wine was censored, the editor explaining in a preface that such discourse was inappropriate in a classic book of 'Islamic' medicine. The modern Islamic editor, then, imposed authenticity on the medieval heritage of the region.

Conservative Islamic attempts at imposing authority and morality come up against sectors of society now accustomed to personal autonomy, as well as the forces of desire, liberated by the processes of modernity, which broke up the patriarchal community. To Iranian youth Western pop and football stars are much more meaningful than *velayet-e faqih*. Egyptian students resort to an odd concept of Islamic law, that of *urfi* or customary marriage, to co-habit with lovers without their parents' knowledge or consent, to the outrage of the moral censors and the press. Egyptian authorities, religious and secular, pursue imagined satanic cults, pornographic displays, erotic chewing gum (supposedly distributed by Israeli agents to corrupt Muslim girls), homosexual conspiracies, and errant authors – all in their tireless efforts to eradicate deviant and inauthentic cultures, products of Western corruption. This paranoid vigilance fits in well with the aims of authoritarian rule and a sensationalist press. But does it signal a losing battle?

Notes

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso: London, 1991).
2. See my forthcoming book, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (I.B. Tauris: London, 2003).
3. *Kitab manafi' al-aghdhiyah wa daf' madarriha* (1st printed edition, Cairo, 1888; censored edition under discussion, Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-'Ulum, 1985). See David Waines, 'Al-Balkhi on the Nature of Forbidden Drink', in Manuela Marin and David Waines (eds), *La Alimentacion en las Culturas Islamicas* (Agencia Espanola de Cooperacion Internacional: Madrid, 1994), 111–26.

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An Egyptian couple strolls past a cinema.