

Religious Reform

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A growing body of scholarly work is devoting attention to how Muslim traditions articulate notions that might fit the standards of a modern polity.¹ This research focus calls into question the extent to which such notions become ingrained in the norms of modern public spheres, which represent the communicative and legitimizing basis of potentially democratic political systems. The reconfiguration of the normative discourses and the institutional footing of Islamic 'reform' movements in the framework of public spheres can be termed 'public Islam'.

Even in times of burgeoning forms of social association and mobilization carried under Islamic banners, which are based on local (sub-national) and (global) transnational levels, it should be acknowledged that the nation-state framework has been historically the major platform for the rise of such norms of public Islam. Egyptian society and its history present an interesting case for re-locating the notion of the public sphere within nation-state building. The specific interest in analysing public Islam relates to how the self-reforming impetus of religious traditions impacts notions of social justice, welfare and governance as well as 'social health', and on the political process at large.

The public sphere and 'public Islam'

That Muslim reformers were the hub of the public sphere at the stage of its emergence in the second half of the 19th century and for several decades thereafter, might seem to clash with Habermasian presuppositions that see a modern public sphere as free from the allegedly ritualistic and 'representational' features of traditional notions of publicness. Several other scholars have, however, stressed that also in Western societies the role of puritan and pietistic socio-religious movements and reformers has not been the exception, but the rule. The public sphere is the site where contests take place over the definition not only of the 'common good', but also of the catalogue of virtues, obligations, and rights required of the members of society (in due time citizens of the nation-state). The emergent sense of public goes hand in hand with the diffusion of norms whereby a member of the community is defined as an autonomous moral-social agent, and is simultaneously expected to be com-

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mitted to the collective goals of the community. Therefore, it should not be surprising that reformed religious traditions play a role in the process. It would be impossible to understand the political and legal philosophy of Locke outside of the framework of Calvinist reform theology.

In a comparable vein, from the 1870s onwards, Muslim reformers in Egypt, acting not only as writers but also as editors, publishers and sponsors of new and largely autonomous press organs, expanded the area of Islamic normative discourse into issues of collective concern like state law, distribution of wealth, and work ethics, which are of vital significance for any modernizing society. As shown by Michael Gasper, the Islamic reform movement (*islah*) established the conceptual frame defining the external boundaries of the 'society' on the basis of which the nation-state was defined, including the lines of exclusion and inclusion. Theorizing about 'social ills', they saw in properly intended Islamic traditions the cure at hand. A contemporary of Muhammad 'Abduh, 'Abdallah al-Nadim (1845-1896), defined virtue not just in terms of the canonical injunction *al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil), but as tied to economic development and 'industriousness'.²

However, we cannot assume that the public intellectuals of the Islamic reform were just playing into the hands of the nation-state. They influenced state educational and legal policies, and initiated autonomous projects within the associational life of the main urban centres, whilst backing up both activities with a public discourse that brought to bear a distinctive view of the Muslim moral being. From that historical moment on, a whole spectrum of differentiated attitudes of personalities, groups and movements of public Islam has developed as to how to manage the state and its ambition to normalize and incorporate public Islam into the normative standards of the nation-state framework (first and foremost 'citizenship', and a culturalization of Islam into a major factor of national identity also acceptable to non-Muslim minorities).

The reformers' intervention in Muslim traditions in the context of the formation of a modern public sphere did not collapse traditional notions of personhood, community and authority into the modern model of personal responsibility and loyalty to the nation-state. On the other hand, state policies could only gain coherence in an epistemological terrain that the emergent 'public Islam' foregrounded no less than colonial policies did. The bottom line is that it would be very difficult to prove that the emergence of public Islam was either purely functional or merely reactive to the process of nation-state formation.

If the normative framework associated with public Islam does not perfectly fit nation-state building, this is because the virtues propagated by the reformers, whilst indeed favouring social mobilization and disciplining in the framework of the nation-state, were not conceived in terms of formulas of

citizenship within a civil law setting, but were seen as rooted in *shari'a*. This notion, more than 'Islamic law', signifies something like 'Islamic normativity' or 'Islamic normative reason' (at least as used and implemented in the discourse of modern Muslim reformers).

Mustafa Mahmud

This pattern of disjunction and partial convergence between nation-state building and public Islam that we meet in the reform discourse of 'Abdallah al-Nadim is still found a century later – under modified circumstances of the state-society relationship – in the work of Mustafa Mahmud, probably the main personality of public Islam in Egypt. In the period of his ascent to public moral authority in the 1970s and 1980s, the cleavage between state-loyal vs. oppositional, or 'integrationist' vs. 'isolationist' Islam, not unproblematic if applied to the period between the 1920s and 1960s, becomes ever less capable of capturing the reconfiguration of public Islam *vis-à-vis* the nation-state.

The principal generator of public moral authority in Islamic terms that Mustafa Mahmud was able to play upon was the idea of a continuity between personal excellence and rectitude on the one hand, and commitment to the welfare of the community on the other. Mustafa Mahmud impersonated this script of public virtue as the founder of the most famous new Islamic *jam'iyya* (welfare association) in Cairo, and as the author and moderator of a very popular television documentary series on *al-ilm wa-l-iman* (science and faith), where he has proven capable of swaying Islamic discourse back and forth across the thin border between the edifying and the entertaining. Through this television programme that he set up from scratch in the early 1970s, Mustafa Mahmud belongs to the pioneers of Egyptian television, a medium that rapidly spread into middle class households. In the post-Nasser political context – where the repressive capacities of the state with respect to its citizens are technically intact or even refined, although they no longer enjoy a solid legitimacy – the public styling of self-correctness and its rooting in religious credibility and authority have been crucial conditions for the efficacy of discourse, as the success story of Mustafa Mahmud shows. This credibility is also supported by the social work of the *jam'iyya* Mustafa Mahmud founded in 1975: growing in size and range of (mainly medical) services up to the present (see photo).

As also shown by the path of Mustafa Mahmud, the acquisition of credentials of public Islamic authority is subject to increasing differentiation: *vis-à-vis* the state, public Islam might be in a relation of collaboration, complicity, indifference, suspicion, hostility and outward opposition to terrorism (at the level where Islam eclipses from public visibility). Moreover, the success of one or the other new Islamic spokesmen is certainly dependent on an increasing degree of capacity to match the needs and orientations of a composite public. This makes the state's task of controlling public Islam ever more difficult. More generally, and in a line of con-

tinuity from the early stages of public Islam in the late 19th-century Egypt till today, the state is not the source of authorization of even state-friendly forms of public Islam.

A balanced notion of public Islam

The Habermasian claim that the public sphere creates social cohesion through mechanisms alternative to state coercion and market interest is still basically valid, and also applies to public Islam. More than that, this force of cohesion is exactly what religious-civilizing traditions, as major sources of collective identities, have been capable of doing since times long prior to the rise of modern nation-states. Therefore, in the rise and transformation of public Islam one can find instances of how religious traditions justify claims of membership within the community that articulate the tense relationship between individual salvation and social order.

If the Habermas framework is too narrow to capture the way public Islam is rooted in Islamic traditions and their ongoing reform, diluting public Islam into a 'post-modern' kind of politics of subjectivity, visibility and imagery does not do justice to how reformed Islamic traditions authorize views of social justice and practices of social welfare. By linking collective identity to forms of subjectivity that might prove difficult to ascertain, or to a plainly staged visibility as a 'politics of display' of signs, post-modern accounts of public Islam fail to duly link Muslim identity to welfare and justice, and also fail to focus on the mechanisms of recognition that authorize identity and legitimize visibility. The possible usefulness of a transculturally feasible, post-Habermasian notion of the public sphere that can be applied to the transformation of religious traditions and the emergence of a vast array of socio-religious movements, is in helping to frame the platform where nation-state projects on identity, justice and welfare intersect and overlap with – and sometimes are challenged by – movements and projects grounded on (often consciously reformed) religious traditions.

Notes

1. Cf. Eickelman, Dale and Piscatori, James (1996), *Muslim Politics*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press; Krämer, Gudrun (1999), *Gottes Staat als Republik*, Baden-Baden: Nomos.
2. Gasper, Michael (2001), 'Abdallah Nadim, Islamic Reform, and "Ignorant" Peasants: State-Building in Egypt?', in Salvatore, Armando (ed), *Muslim Traditions and Modern Techniques of Power*, *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam*, 3, Hamburg: Lit Verlag, and New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

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Cover of *al-islam fi khandaq*, by Mustapha Mahmud.

