Muslim Modernities & Civic Pluralism

Sajoo, A.B.

Muslim Modernities & Civic Pluralism

AMYN B. SAJOO

As the locus of lived Muslim modernity, neither the everyday nor the public space in which it occurs fits the paradigm of mainstream secular liberalism. The civil and ethical particulars that give shape to Muslim lifeworlds are distinct from and yet overlap with Western (and other) modernities. This article argues that reimagining those particulars—in contexts that range from cinema and epic-tales to architecture and urban design—yields a cosmopolitanism that avoids lapsing into relativism, and is true to the pluralist ethos of Islam itself.

Modernity has many guises. In Jafar Panahi's acclaimed 2003 film, *Crimson Gold* (*Talaye sorkh*), Hossein is a stolid, blue-collar veteran of the Iran-Iraq war who delivers pizzas in Tehran. This exposes our protagonist to the full spectrum of urban sprawl, from clogged traffic to privileged suburbs, the denizens of which might as well be living in Las Vegas. In a poignant encounter at the end of the film, Hossein finds himself trying to deliver pizzas in the lavish quarters of the Other. Here, in stark contrast to his usual clients, people are lean, loquacious, wealthy, and worldly. Yet, Hossein's delivery is impeded by the police, who are busy arresting the decadent young guests of a late-night party. Though generous enough to dole out slices of pizza to the policemen thwarting his delivery, such encounters eventually drive Hossein to breaking point.

Modernity on a motorcycle

Crimson Gold interrogates more than the 1979 Iranian Revolution's cry of *mustaz'afin*, "solidarity with the oppressed." Certainly, there is plenty of blame to go around. If the theocratic State stifles the personal freedoms of many young Iranians, there are other rich youths who, as one policeman observes, are left only to "sleep during the day." While the wealthy enjoy every new technology, Hossein is compelled to climb four flights of stairs because the lift is broken. The traffic chokes; yet Hossein, on a fair sized motorcycle, contributes to this. Avarice is everywhere: "If you want to arrest a thief, you'll have to arrest the world," comments one cynical felon. It is the human condition that *Crimson Gold* engages with plaintively in the spirit of contemporary Iranian cinema, spearheaded by Panahi's mentor, Abbas Kiarostami, as well as by Samira Makhmalbaf and others. We are invited not merely to observe the sins and blessings of onscreen characters, but to reflect on the culture, ethics and political reality in which individuals and communities live—and on the outcomes of choices made by a widening circle that finally encompasses history itself.

Cinema as a medium lends itself well to such an exploration. This success has much to do with its politically transgressive power—a power which continues to keep censors busy the world over. *Crimson Gold* was banned in Iran; while Jafar Panahi and several fellow directors have been denied permission to enter the United States. Of course, this transgressive power concerns not only *what* the images say, but also *how* they say them. In a domain that is mundane or even profane, cinema captures the visual flattening of time. Its images, meanwhile, like the fire of Prometheus, are stolen from the realm of the sacred.

> The narrowing of tolerance has more to do with modern secular nationalism and colonial legacies than with a jealous religiosity.

Muslim life worlds both differ from and overlap with Western modernities. Everyday expressions of Muslim identity and citizenship can give a more reliable picture of existing multiple modernities than doctrines or ideologies do. Drawing on examples from cinema, literature, and architecture, this article argues that social visions in the Muslim world are part of modernity.

It is in this sense that Charles Baudelaire's essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1860) draws attention to the narrative power of images. To this work is ascribed the first use of the term "modernity." Like Panahi's roving camera, Baudelaire seeks to extract meaning from the everyday with its crowds and masks. Finding much to embrace and disdain in the everyday, he persists in his quest for an elusive present. In hindsight, Baudelaire's approach was derived from an appreciation and measure of time that, in more recent years, has come to be regarded as the quintessence of modernity.

Time, technology, the cherishing of subjectivity amid class difference, civil society, and a heightened consciousness of the presence of the State, all these lend substance to the varying guises of modernity. The ways in which they do so may, like the relentless traffic in which Hossein delivers pizzas, appear inevitable. Yet, the outcomes of myriad choices are certainly not inevitable; nor do they bear the same significance, emerging out of histories both shared and distinct. Baudelaire's obsession with the here and now was integral to the secular as a new phenomenon, and to secularism as a European sociopolitical doctrine. Panahi's obsession with urban time may gesture to the secular; but it is located in a public space that is clearly different from that occupied by Euro-secularism. It is thus that we find expressions of the civil which make for plural modernities.

Anyone for authenticity?

Social imaginaries in the Muslim world, for all their differences, partake of the Modern. True, strident Western narratives have spurred an industry in counter-assertions of identity, of difference as essential. The talk of authenticity figures much in the postmodern critique, in reply to the overdetermination of identity by hegemons, real or perceived. In Muslim contexts, it finds expression in the insistence of a "return," usually to a pristine original—text, historical period, practice—cast as authentic. This is mirrored by Western commentators for whom the distinctiveness of Islam is expedient. In both cases, this othering serves political ends, if it is not exoticization for its own sake.

Aziz al-Azmeh pits historicity against the rhetoric of authenticity to avoid exceptionalising Islam, though he does not directly link this to the nature or making of plural modernities.[1] Mohammed Arkoun, in contrast, explicitly links the historical role of the *imaginaire* in managing "symbolic capital" to claims of authenticity.[2] However, it is the religious imaginary of Islam and the Judeo-Christian traditions that concern Arkoun, rather than the broader social imaginary that occupies us here.

Historicism of a special sort—sacralization—feeds the talk of authenticity in Salafi revivalist trends. Tradition is placed in binary opposition to Modernity, as is often done in Western accounts. Yet it is on a continuum between old and new, past and present, that individuals and communities locate themselves in practice. Needless to say, the everyday expressions of Muslim identity and citizenship, piety and protest, music and modes of dress more reliably yield a picture of the secular than do its ideological markers.

Let us recall how diverse even "core" religious traditions are among Muslims, down to their interpretations of the Quran and Sharia. The more evident this becomes in a globalized world, the more fiercely it is denounced by defenders of a univocal Tradition—outside of which all is profane, whether professed by Muslims or non-Muslims. Yet sacred and secular motifs happily accompany each other in the epics, folk-tales, music, and architecture of Islam. Such components are of formative importance in the identity and ethos of individuals, com-

munities, nations, and civilizations. At times penetrating more deeply than any formal doctrine or ideologies, *The Thousand and One Nights,* the songs of Umm Kalthoum, and the Alhambra do not merely captivate, they also shape how Muslims and non-Muslims see the world and themselves. In the richly illustrated *Hamzanama* (Adventures of Hamza), a collection of heroic narratives about the Prophet Muhammad's uncle, imaginative courage serves virtue: nature is celebrated, political power is mocked, females are empowered, and saints are playful. Such themes educate, socialize, and refresh devotion as they are indigenized and Islamized in the reinvention of tradition.

Cosmopolitanism

The narratives and markers that have plied the circuits of the Silk Road, the Mediterranean, the Sahel, and beyond remind us of the vintage—and vantage—of a pluralist ethos. Yes, it was fed by what sociologists call "the economy of desire"—the driving consumerism of material culture—but there is more to it. For Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240), coming out of Andalusia's melting pot, overlapping faith traditions across cultures spoke to an underlying unity; and they did so without a relativism according to which anything goes.[3] For the Fatimids in Egypt (969-1171), the Mughals under Akbar (r.1556-1605), and often under the Ottomans, the cultivation of a *modus vivendi* among diverse subjects gave rise to a pluralist ethic that was enshrined in law. The narrowing of tolerance has more to do with modern secular nationalism and colonial legacies than with a jealous religiosity.
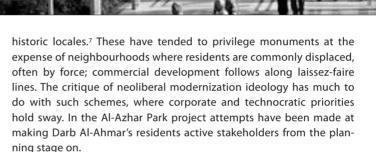
In our post-9/11 world, the conceits of secularist hegemony come at a high cost. A serious engagement with religion occurs mainly when it meets security objectives. Otherwise, notes Kevin McDonald, liberalism prefers to flaunt a style of cosmopolitanism (complete with an abstract view of agency) grounded in the ideal of autonomy—which thrives on its opposite, fundamentalism.[4] The liberal cosmopolitan is everywhere at home, welcoming the unknown; the fundamentalist is confined by tradition. The former is curious and open to change; the latter fears and opposes it through tribal anti-modernism.

What this posture fails to grasp are religious grammars outside the secularized personal Christianity of Europe, though such grammars were vital in the West as "sources of the self" that ushered in new public cultures.[5] Today, older movements (like the Muslim Brotherhood) must contend with globalized forms of religiosity linked to mobility and diaspora. Some religious movements are violent, others are peaceful; but there is more to either than identity politics or resistance to globalism. Post-secular understandings of agency, ethics, and responsibility are needed to deal with new questions confronting the civil. The Habermasian secular public sphere of mainstream liberalism no longer cuts the kebab, if it ever did.

Reimagining the civil

In 2005 Cairo became host to Al-Azhar Park, a seventy four-acre green space that has come to embody historic, ecological and social renewal amid urban overcrowding and decay.[6] It was the culmination of over twenty years of consultative planning, excavation, rehabilitation, home upgrading, and urban design. A site whose harshly saline soil served as a repository for debris and fill was refreshed and endowed with water reservoirs and tens of thousands of trees—in the midst of Egypt's 1,000 year old capital packed with seventeen million people. Residents of the Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood with its appalling housing conditions and massive unemployment were engaged in a renewal of housing, health, work, and credit resources. They were also integral to an archaeological initiative to recover key historic landmarks.

Led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in conjunction with domestic and international partners, the Al-Azhar Park project aspires to provide an alternative to the usual approaches to development in declining

PHOTO BY GARY OTTE / © AKTC, 2006

historic locales.[7] These have tended to privilege monuments at the expense of neighbourhoods where residents are commonly displaced, often by force; commercial development follows along laissez-faire lines. The critique of neoliberal modernization ideology has much to do with such schemes, where corporate and technocratic priorities hold sway. In the Al-Azhar Park project attempts have been made at making Darb Al-Ahmar's residents active stakeholders from the planning stage on.

The Park site is integrated with the adjacent Urban Plaza that comprises the new Museum of Historic Cairo. The project aimed to mould a wider cultural memory and sense of civic belonging, of continuity rather than rupture.[8] It also invokes the particular place of public gardens in Muslim settings from Cordoba, Marrakesh, and Damascus to Isfahan, Lahore, and Delhi. As such, the Park sits congruently with the civic visions of two of the most influential designers of modern public space, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1923) and Hassan Fathy (1900-1989).[9] For Olmsted, landscapes that framed park spaces were key to urban civility; his work included New York's Central Park. Fathy insisted on socially responsible buildings alive to the needs of less privileged rural and urban citizens; his "architecture for the poor" across Egypt won global acclaim. The Olmsted-Fathy conjunction also subverts the Orientalist "segregated Islamic city" of Tradition that is contrasted with Modernity's integrated city. In embodying the ideals of Fathy and Olmsted, Al-Azhar Park flags a modernity that is also Muslim. It reimagines the civil in ways that may set fresh standards for vernaculars, Western and otherwise—rather like the innovative Iranian cinema of Panahi, Kiarostami, and Makhmalbaf.

Central Promenade of Cairo's Al-Azhar Park

Notes

1. Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993), 22-24.

2. Mohammad Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans R. D. Lee (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 6-14, 86-105.

3. William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (New York: SUNY, 1994).

4. Kevin McDonald, *Global Movements: Action and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard, 2007); Armando Salvatore, *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

6. Stefano Bianca and Philip Jodidio, eds., *Cairo: Revitalising a Historic Metropolis* (Turin: AKTC, 2004).

7. See http://www.akdn.org/agency/aktc_hcsp_cairo.html#contact.

8. See Kenneth Frampton, ed., *Modernity and Community: Architecture in the Islamic World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

9. Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1999); Malcolm Miles,"Utopias of Mud? Hassan Fathy and Alternative Modernisms," *Space and Culture* 9 (2006): 115-139.

Amyn B. Sajoo is Research Associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London and editor of the forthcoming *Muslim Modernities: Expressions of the Civil Imagination* (I.B Tauris). Email: asajoo@iis.ac.uk