

Book Reviews

Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim Contexts: Perspectives from the Past

Derryl N. Maclean and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed, eds.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. 190 pages.

This book is a welcome addition to the ever-expanding literature on Muslim cosmopolitanism across the Islamic world. Its chief aim is to decenter the long-held notion that cosmopolitanism was a style of thought that emerged primarily from the heart of Europe, beginning with the Greeks, and then carried over into the Enlightenment age of Emmanuel Kant and reached its full manifestation in the present moment (p. 2). Rather, “cosmopolitan instances,” which Kai Kresse deftly describes as “openness to the world (*Weltoffenheit*), experience of the world (*Welterfahrung*), and the skill to deal flexibly with the world (*Weltgewandtheit*)” (p. 33), took root in Muslim societies many centuries ago, particularly during the establishment of the Indian Ocean’s lively maritime Muslim community during the eleventh century.

Chapter 2, by Felicitas Becker, examines the circumstances that led to the conversion of villages along Tanzania’s Swahili coast during the 1920s-30s. She provides evidence showing that Muslim cosmopolitanism was not only an urban phenomenon, but also one that emerged among inland villagers who sought cultural connections with the coast and its wider networks. Mosques in many these villages soon became the nerve centers for both conversion and the building of new ties between people of differing backgrounds.

Chapter 3 delves into Mombasa’s openness to the world, which resulted in the creation of creole communities and plural societies within this Kenyan port city from the sixteenth century onward. Kresse describes his encounters with a host of ethnic and religious groups that had lived harmoniously side-by-side and, over the course of a few hundred years, had developed a cosmopolitan “maritime culture” (p. 44). The Ethiopians, Baluchis, Somalis, Bohras, Swahilis, Gujaratis, and Hadramis were among the communities that helped make Kenya’s Muslim communities so cosmopolitan.

However, the book's chapters are not confined to the Indian Ocean alone or to maritime communities. Chapters 4 and 5 cover the Ottoman Empire's administration of its colonies. Chapter 4, by Thomas Kuehn, analyzes the early twentieth-century management of northern Yemen. A land plagued by protests, the Ottomans were finally forced to devise new strategies to obtain the local Arab leaders' acquiescence. One workable solution was the practice of "colonial cosmopolitanism," which involved a creative blend of the British and Ottoman (i.e., *millet*) systems of governance. The upshot of this was that those local imams who maintained their allegiance to the Ottomans were given greater autonomy and allowed to keep their existing degree of influence in politics and piety.

Ariel Salzman's following chapter on Istanbul and Izmir seems a little out of place, for instead of engaging with the term *cosmopolitanism* and showing how it was grounded in the heart of the Ottoman Empire, she skirts around it. Her essay is, however, rich with references to inter-communal ties in these two cities during the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, thereby showing how the great cultural diversity of Ottoman cities resembled the cosmopolitan cities of western Christendom. Like Felicitas, Salzman directs her vision not only to the elites, but also to the poor and disenfranchised who struggled to accept each other's differences and peculiarities in the empire's ever-changing urban centers.

The next three chapters direct the readers' attention to cosmopolitanism in the realm of cultural and discursive practices. Will Hanley's rather humorous chapter on "cosmopolitan cursing" in late nineteenth-century Alexandria narrates the problems of translations and cultural differences that were bound to emerge among communities that spoke different languages and perceived their realities differently. Colonialism added to this already existing layer of miscommunication and misunderstanding by putting in place laws that seemed to favor certain communities over others. Hanley's chapter demonstrates that while easy communication has been seen as a hallmark of such cosmopolitan cities as Alexandria, the reality was far more complex. Curses of fellow subjects and colonial officials were common. But when translated into the language of colonial courts, they became contentious and sometimes political, thereby calling into question the everyday cosmopolitanism found in French colonies.

From the issue of translation in Alexandria, Nile Green's chapter moves on to "culinary cosmopolitanism" in early nineteenth-century Persia. Green makes the larger point that cosmopolitanism emerged in relaxed settings, such as dining, as can be seen in the case of Britons and Iranians enjoying their respective delicacies. Differences in backgrounds and cultures, according to him,

collapsed in the face of good food, particularly tea. So fascinated were the Persians with the various foods found in Britain that emissaries from Iran went to great lengths to emulate British culinary practices. From this perspective, culinary cosmopolitanism blurred the divide between the colonized and the colonizer, East and West, and the hegemon and the weaker powers.

Chapter 8, by Iftikhar Dadi, explores the paintings of Abdur Rahman Chughtai, a twentieth-century artist in Lahore. Dadi argues that Chughtai's cosmopolitan taste was displayed in his ability to fuse different historical traditions in Islamic painting to produce his own unique art style. Despite being a cosmopolite within Islam, this artist nevertheless remained ambivalent about modernity and modern art. In fact, he sought to resist the influence of modernism in Islamic art by appealing to the ideas of Muhammad Iqbal, among others, and incorporating their ideals into his work.

This book closes with an essay on the issue of *tashabbuh bi al-kuffār* (imitating non-Muslims) by the renowned Islamicist Muhammad Khalid Masud. In his exploration of the religious views of such intellectual luminaries as al-Ghazali and Ibn Taimiyyah, he argues that their pronouncements on this issue were borne out of their specific historical circumstances and thus are neither totalizing nor binding. Indeed, in general terms generations of Muslims have been open to accepting other cultures and practices, as well as incorporating those aspects that did not contradict Islam's main tenets. The seemingly narrow views of scholars were but a fragment of the cosmopolitanism so advocated by Islam.

Given this volume's broad reach and scope, one would have expected to encounter a working definition of Muslim cosmopolitanism from a historical, sociological, and philosophical point of view. And yet such a definition was nowhere to be found – truly a missed opportunity. Moreover, the introductory chapter or perhaps the concluding chapter could have summed up the findings in an integrative analysis and theorization. That said, this fundamental weakness in no way reduces this edited volume's critical importance. Scholars working on the topic of Muslim cosmopolitanism can now recognize the existence of such a proclivity within Muslim societies. Muslim cosmopolitanism as a topic should therefore be broached further in future studies as a way to draw lessons on how to deal with the fractious world in which we are living today and as a lever to challenge present-day claims that Islam is a religion of hate, bigotry, and intolerance.

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Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism

Ali Mirsepassi and Tadd Graham Fernée
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 225 pages.

Ali Mirsepassi and Tadd Graham Fernée introduce their book as a “critical study of citizenship, state, and globalization in societies historically influenced by Islamic traditions and institutions” (p. 1). They place their approach in the framework of the relationships between individuals and the state, religion, and political community as part of investigating the democratic aspirations of Islamic societies. These relationships are then contextualized in a global setting wherein such aspirations presumably interconnect with some “cosmopolitan ideal.”

The book’s main thrust is quite clear from the outset in light of the authors’ two grounding assumptions: In order to attain agency and freedom humanity in general, but Muslims in particular, must (1) respect the “core Enlightenment values” of human equality and dignity regardless of ethnicity, religious affiliation, and belief or disbelief and (2) acquire a spatial vision of democracy that incorporates “the cognitive-imaginative resources of a multidimensional Islamic heritage” (p. 1). In short, an approach in which an overarching and universal Eurocentric value structure that respects Islam would help deconstruct any essentialist framework that posits the latter and Enlightenment as dichotomous opposites. This could be done through a “global ethic of reconciliation” – an alternative to the “death of epistemic universalism” (p. 30) along John Stuart Mill’s depiction of barbarian races in their failed relations to liberty – that sociologically interconnects three domains of a specific spatial-temporal context of Islamic practices, the democratic social virtue of nonviolence, and the cosmopolitanism of universal and shared human values (p. 4).

The authors’ analytical framework integrates three strands of twentieth-century critical thought concerning democratic nation-building. These pertain to John Dewey’s “conceptual pluralism,” Edmund Husserl’s “lifeworld” and “temporal Horizons,” and Amartya Sen’s conception of cultural variability and freedom as “capabilities” (p. 5). This is articulated within what Mirsepassi and Fernée designate as a “Pragmatic Revolution” that perceives an “unthought conjuncture between the Jasmine Revolution” – the so-called Arab Spring – and these critical strands’ gaining ground in western thought (p. 3). This is done through the tripartite problematic of “embeddedness,” “embodiment,” and the “unthought” (p. 7), all of which point to a new, even if inadequately, “theorized cosmopolitan horizon” (p. 7). The goal is to understand the “Jasmine Revolutions” as new popular forms of mobilization that respond to a specific pattern of the modern experience, while asking the question of

“how” in action (pp. 9-10) and linking up with the tacit dimension (Michael Polanyi’s “*We can know more than we can tell*”) of the unthought as the very basis of political “freedom of thought” (p. 15). Such freedom is made possible by a *scientific* worldview that always bears on a still “unrevealed reality” and on the unthought’s “passionate struggle for democratic freedom as a chosen commitment” (p. 25).

The following five chapters critically review the works or “texts” of prominent Arab scholars who have dealt with the various problematics of democracy, tradition, modernity, cosmopolitanism, and law from various perspectives: Abdel Aziz Al-Azmeh, Talal Asad, Muhammad Arkoun, Abdullahi Ahmad An-Naim, and Fatima Mernissi. Mirsepasi and Fernée are particularly influenced by Arkoun, who offers a simultaneous critique of western and Islamic reason as an opening toward democratic ends unconstrained by linear progressive horizons or ultimate closures, as well as an opening toward pluralism (i.e., ontology subverted in favor of epistemology) (p. 31). Here, in the tradition of Dewey, the ideal of public action becomes a matter of “modified institutions” based on the “possibilities” and “imagination” of “old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating” (p. 22).

In the context of this book, the final outcome of this is to further the democratic tradition of cosmopolitan justice (p. 84). The latter requires the historical subversion, based on Arkoun’s methodology of the thinkable/unthought interaction (chapter 4), of the “orthodoxy” that leads Muslims to think about “what is as yet unthinkable” (p. 32). This, according to the authors, would open the way for a “new cosmopolitanism” that would find its expression in everyday experience rather than in “distant dreams of ultimate reality linked to concentrated state power” (p. 33).

The rest of the scholars dealt with are critically analyzed in light of Arkoun’s influence on the authors. Thus, Al-Azmeh (chapter 2) is observed in terms of his contestation of Islamist essentialism and modernity’s militant cosmopolitanism (as an unthought). Asad (chapter 3) is examined from within his critique of cosmopolitan modernism in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. An-Naim’s (chapter 5) legal approach is analyzed in relation to his discussion of the conflicts between the Shari‘ah and constitutionalism. Finally, Mernissi’s (chapter 6) non-essentialist approach is highlighted as she contests the totalitarian legacy of Muslim state-building during the twentieth century. In this context, the authors challenge what they perceive to be Al-Azmeh’s ontological privileging of the state as the bearer of modernity, Asad’s dualism between Islamic authenticity and secular modernity, An-Naim’s rather “incoherent” combination of state and Islamic ontology on the one hand with secular institutional practice and con-

sensual probability on the other, and Mernissi's "failed" historicism and simplified model of Islam.

Mirsepassi and Fernée's textual analysis of these works seek to explore what they call "an emerging global ethic of reconciliation at the practical level," one that privileges real and actual humanity and links this to understanding the "mass movements" transforming Muslim societies – the "how" in action, or the reflecting on how these societies can make themselves at home in a modern world comprised of traditions and multiple others (p. 199). They perceive the so-called Jasmine revolutions as being strategically positioned to re-imagine and transcend the "intractable" problem of the state being the agent of truth (i.e., the religious or Islamic state). This strategic location is then linked to the Pragmatic Revolution by re-positioning the *democratic Enlightenment* as a "practical intellectual tradition rather than an ontological claim about reality" (p. 23).

Yet while they argue that the cosmopolitan ideal should reject any Eurocentric world historical temporality, their call for virtually adopting the Enlightenment's core values essentially makes this claim problematic. In fact, they explicitly state their position as one in which they "reject authenticity and uphold secular democracy" (p. 16). Given this, in essence this work is attempting to replace *western* ontology with *western* epistemology, in the frame of which the critical study of Islamic traditions and institutions is undertaken. This in itself is also methodologically problematic, especially when combined with a situation in which the Jasmine revolutions, for whatever reasons, have in many ways largely turned out to be grand failures.

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