

# *Muslim Modernities*

Expressions of the Civil Imagination

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includes nine chapters contributed by Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars such as Bruce Lawrence, John Renard and Hasna Lebbady, with an introduction and final chapter written by

He demonstrates that the definition of modernity is itself elusive given that we can no longer subscribe to a singular modernity. Sajoo cites the example of how civil society is often associated with the secular West to illustrate the potential usefulness of the concept of plural modernities. He argues that the Muslim world shares in the value of civic solidarity so it should not be excluded from the narrative of civil society. Understanding modernity in a pluralist perspective thus accommodates this reality. Sajoo also points to the example of the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> period to demonstrate the limits of secular human rights.

This volume of essays directs our attention to the regional and local histories, contexts and ways of life which shape the specific forms that global

principles of modernity such as democratic governance and human rights, assume in a given part of the world, in this case, the societies of the Muslim World. These essays explore how striving towards modernity has, in fact, led to moral and political realities that do not

The key question that informs this work is what is the relationship between the state and the public realm, between religion and politics? There is an acknowledgement throughout this volume of the necessity to promote a multi-cultural ethic through adapting Islamic traditions in line with a more liberal world view. The essays emphasise the dynamism of Islam through an exploration of the use of religious and literary traditions in the public sphere as a means of creating a sense of community and identity which is linked to the past, as well as the development of a civic spirit which is pluralistic in outlook and tolerant in its aims.

#### Literature as Integral to the Creation of the Modern Public Sphere


Bruce Lawrence addresses this issue through an exploration of the transformation of the nature of debates on Qur'anic interpretation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the British Raj. He reminds us that the advent of British colonial rule in the Indian sub-continent was not merely about superior arms, military organisation and political power. Colonialism also brought about cultural technologies of rule grounded in the logic of science, rational thought and secularisation. The result was a struggle to create a spiritual realm that not only


entailed a religio-cultural identity but led



Iqbal, the Holy Qurʾān is conceived as a source of foundational principles that can act as a bridge between Islam and the modern world by providing a much needed spiritual foundation to Western material progress. Lawrence places crucial



Hasna Lebbady 



development of Central Asian music is now primarily funded by private initiatives and NGOs rather than national governments. Tradition in this context is set within liberal ideals of innovation,

to wear the . The physical appearance of this type of dress together with a liberal ethos of choice and individuality challenges the secular assumption of a modernity that is separate from religion.

### Politics and Difference in the Public Sphere

In this essay, Bryan Turner poses a fundamental question on the very nature of creating a multi-cultural society. For Turner, the global outreach of the Islamist piety movement has created groups whose ideals and actions are in contrast to a cosmopolitan ethic. These groups



the potential to create an inclusive sense of community, identity and moral reasoning. She states that virtues of tolerance and cultural diversity integrate immigrants effectively by not demanding that they choose between their history and a new habitus. Conversely, the exclusion of certain aspects of identity from public legitimacy has the potential to alienate. This trend has been marked in Euro-American paranoia about Muslim communities as havens for enemies of freedom.



there appears to be an enforced amnesia<sup>1</sup> sweeping through Muslim societies. For example,

different analyses of the status of women?

2) How have these rituals of intimacy become exclusionary in nature, especially in the post-September 11th context? What are the implications of this and how does it affect the relationship between state and society?

3) With regard to Islam and multiculturalism, do you think that the issues surrounding ethnic diversity are a modern phenomenon or were they always present in, for example, pre-colonial Southeast Asia or in Islamic Spain or in the Ottoman Empire?

While the Holy Qur'an is authoritative as a whole, its content must be applied to particular contexts. What aspect of the Holy Qur'an applies and where? When does it apply and for whom? Why are some but not all passages of the Holy Qur'an of special value at different times and places? And how do changes in context impart special value to particular verses or chapters? (p. 28)

2) Can you think of examples from your own contexts of how religious identities and values can play a constructive role in civil society?


3) What is the role of education, both religious and secular, in addressing issues concerning history and identity? Can you think of how programmes such as the Madrasa Early Childhood Development Programme with its integrated curriculum, can help to address the perceived dichotomy between religious and secular education?

It is possible to speak of an excess of secularism, when it becomes a fetish of modernity. In contrast with the formation of the public sphere in the West, characterized initially as a bourgeois sphere that excluded the working classes and women, in Muslim contexts of modernity, women function as a pivotal site in the making and representing of the public sphere. (p. 130)

Individuals from divergent ethnicities, cultures, classes and even linguistic heritages can locate a powerful, shared identity around faith-based practices and doctrines. Religious groups and associations foster networks of shared values. (p. 168)

Religious identity can and does contribute to national loyalty and civic engagement. Robert Putnam's study of civic activity in America revealed a definitive link between religious affiliation and broader civic ties. He found that 75 per cent of church members gave regularly to charity, compared with 50 per cent to 60 per cent of non-members. (p. 171)


Islam has acquired new forms of visibility in the last two decades, as it makes its way in the public avenues of both Muslim and European societies. (p. 119) Religious symbols in public schools and universities have become a divisive issue both in France and Turkey, provoking a larger debate on secularism. The history of the separation of Church and State can be traced to the seventeenth century and the European religious wars. However, for societies such as those of China, India, South Africa as well as Malaysia, their historical experience of religion and the state is removed from the European and even American experience, where there is a constitutional separation between the Church and State. This highlights the need to open up our readings of modernity to non-Western contexts and reiterates Sajoo's argument



that the idea of pluralist understandings and experiences of modernity holds promise.

C) Art, Culture and Modernity

1) In what ways can the promotion of cultural heritage engender a pluralistic



global connections are nothing new. What is challenging is retaining a link to art rooted in a local sense of place and tradition. For what do sense of place and tradition mean in the art and music of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? (p. 115) On the whole,