
NEW DIRECTIONS IN ISLAM
Islam, Civility and Political Culture
Edited by
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Vassilios Adrahtas
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New Directions in Islam

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Islam, Civility and Political Culture

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research and exploration, the kind with which we are preoccupied in this book. Finally, we are greatly appreciative of the hard work and dedication of the editorial and production team at Palgrave Macmillan, specifically to thank Poppy Hull, our editorial correspondent.

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1

Introduction: Eschaton and Civility in Islamic History

Milad Milani

1.1 Overview

This book examines the theme of civility, as well as the related idea of political culture, in the Muslim world with the aim of identifying and explaining how they have been understood in the past and up to the present time. Each chapter focuses on a specific period and deals with distinct Islamic perspectives, offering a systematic, comprehensive and interdisciplinary exploration of the theme(s) under discussion. Lastly, the project aims at satisfying the need to approach and assess the political aspects of Islam in as much an integrated manner as possible by bringing together insights from a range of disciplines, namely, history, political science, sociology, religious studies, anthropology and Islamic studies.

The study of Islamic civilisation has been a central topic of concern for several decades, highlighted by Marshal Hodgson's three-volume work *The Venture of Islam* (1974). Other notable works that treat the subject on

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a grand scale are the encyclopaedic effort of Ira Lapidus' *A History of Islamic Societies* (1988) and Bryan S. Turner's thematic study *The Sociology of Islam: Collected Essays of Bryan S. Turner* (2013). The theme of civility, however, had not been thoroughly treated within the context of Islam until very recently, when the inquiry into the subject was spearheaded by Armando Salvatore in his extensive study *Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility* (2016). Yet, the subject still requires greater attention, especially with regards to its development from a historical point of view. There are also areas of examination in relation to civility and the cognate concepts of the political and cultural that require further systematic exploration, such as Shi'a thought, literary culture, the Sufi and *falsafa*. One major concern of the project is to bring forward the nuanced debates around the problem of the relationships, dynamics and tensions that are seen as either existing or perceived between the religious/sacred and the socio-political/secular in the Muslim world. Although Islam has not historically demonstrated an overt tension between such paradigms in the way that they have been problematised in Christianity, this project aspires to argue that these very same tensions have become—especially in modernity—quite pertinent (and possibly even of an urgent nature) to Islam in the current socio-political context.

The chapters in this book are arranged thematically and in a broad chronological sequence. Each chapter will to some extent deal with both historical and contemporary expressions of civility and political culture in Muslim societies. The first chapter, also the introduction, addresses the historical and theoretical aspects of the abovementioned tensions, looking closely at Taha's 'second message of Islam' and Ibn Khaldun's theory of civilisations (*asabiyya*), and a revisiting of the prophetic missions of Moses and Muhammad as two case study examples. Chapter 2 will showcase the present quandary of Islam in modernity with a view to its historical conditioning and present imagining. Chapter 3 touches on broad concerns about the alternative presented by Islamic religiosity with regards to modes of institutionalised civility. Chapter 4 has a strong comparative focus as it traces civility across Christendom and the Islamicate coming up to its conceptualisations in the West and modernity. Chapter 5 examines the hermeneutic and interpretive articulation of civility through a textual analysis of the Islamic canon. Chapter 6 explores

medieval to modern elements of civility in the court culture of the subcontinent. Chapter 7 addresses the distinctive character of the political phenomenology of Shi'ism by studying the successive transformations of Shi'ite political engagement. Chapters 8 and 9 examine the quintessential 'flashpoint' of gender in the context of the modern values of democracy and human rights (Shepard 2014, p. 342); in fact, the question of gendered holiness goes to the heart of the dilemma of Islam and civility, and this final chapter addresses the issue in terms of the paradox of gender in Islamic mysticism.

The issues raised in this book are also examined with an eye to the parallel roles of the interpretive and dogmatic modes that pervade the intellectual history of Islam. These (often unobserved activities) continue to determine Muslim sociality and politicality. That is to say, it is a question of how the different styles of thinking shape Islamic social and political engagement. This also has ramifications for views to 'orthodoxy' as a central debate when attempting to define Islam's relationality to civility and political culture(s). Careful consideration is therefore given the processes of Muslim intellectualisation and rationalisation of significant events in Islamic history so as to discern the way that Muslims, as agents of history, play a direct role in shaping their future through their relationship to the past. Long have Muslim ideologues projected onto the past the utopian dream of socio-political unification. Likewise, they have sought to replicate past circumstance for present gain. Yet, is this a notion best retired? Common as it may be, should not such a truly outmoded framework (and not just in the sense of what is presently in vogue amongst academics) be abandoned for better alternatives? One alternative—albeit, a radical, hermeneutical one—that offers a genuinely original and critical rigour was proposed by Mahmoud Muhammad Taha (1909–1985), whose legacy was introduced to the English-speaking world and is carried by Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im (Taha 1987). Consequently, there are important currents of continuity and discontinuity in a discourse of past and present relations—that is, the question of Muslim historicality—that have generated certain kinds of 'salvific' discourse both within the Muslim world and in the diaspora.

1.2 Taha's Understanding of Civility

Taha held that social equality grew out of economic and political equalities and that the former was not only the greatest challenge for societies but also 'the crowning achievement of the civilizing process' (Mahmood 2007, p. 176). He situated this process at the core of 'man's moral evolution from a lower, coercion-oriented moral sense and conduct to a higher, justice-oriented moral sense and conduct' (Mahmood 2007, p. 176). Civility was therefore the highest good, in social terms, that could be cultivated by Muslims if they adhered to the 'second message of Islam' (Mahmood 2007, p. 177).

Simply put, Taha proposed a revival of the Meccan revelations that carried the spiritual/ethical message of Islam that Muhammad had originally intended to impart but was unable because of the circumstances of the time. This 'second message' represented 'ultimate Islam' that is timeless. The 'first message' of Islam, therefore, pertained to a lesser but necessary Islam, one that came to be defined in a fixed time period: Muhammad's *pax Islamica* in Medina. What tradition has misconstrued, he argued, is that the first message of Islam is passed off as the definitive Islam. The 'true' and 'natural' religion that is with God (i.e., the fully disclosed Islam) and that ultimately brings humanity to God is the essential and eternal features of the second message (Mahmood 2007, pp. 144, 177). Proof of this for Taha was that which is legally binding is inferred from divine attitude (Mahmood 2007, p. 158). Meaning that the legal and ritual aspects of the religion are secondary to its spiritual and ethical aspects. Thus, the superiority of the second message would then follow based on what were the highest virtues of Islam that could not be instilled in fullness until a later time. Taha imagined that the full realisation of Islam's essential qualities would then be translatable—and not contestable—in the modern context, since what was thought to have been 'modern' values (i.e., social—including gender—equality, democracy, freedom of individuals) were Islamic all along.

As such, Taha touches on several important points of tension that are important to our discussion regarding the relationality of past and present ideas of religion as they play out in the modern setting. He

maintained that Islam was understood on two levels: the essential and the subsidiary, which corresponded to the 'higher' and the 'lower' parts of the Qur'an, relating to the Meccan and Medinan periods; he also teased apart a crucial difference between *al-mu'minun* and *al-muslimun* (the believers and the Muslims), reserving the latter for those who had attained to true Islam. Thus, 'Muslims' proper were distinguished from those of their brethren who went by this name as part of their religious identity, but were in fact merely 'believers' as per the verse 39:14 of the Qur'an. Key to Taha's thinking is the gradual process by which Muslims are perfected in their Islam, starting from a legal/ritual and moving toward the spiritual/ethical in an upward spiral. Taha's authentic Islam was already inlaid with the values of democracy, equality and freedom. And it was a matter of time before Muslim societies would arrive at that level of civic existence.

Interestingly, Taha's view presents a socialistic, communistic and Marxist view, albeit at the heart of which are God and religion. This is because he believed that their core values were the fundamental features of Islam, which Muhammad taught. Here we touch on some critical points that also highlight the problematics dealt with in this book, namely, that Taha himself embodied this tension between the Eschaton and civility. He was sympathetic of the Marxist position, but saw it as ultimately flawed because of its perceived atheism. Similarly, he was drawn to Western Liberalism because of its advocacy for democracy and individual freedom, but nevertheless saw the West as failing in its promise for equality and, above all, peace. While he believed the West functioned without a moral compass in its capitalist conquest for economic domination, Communism and Marxism were not its genuine correctives, since they were beset by godlessness. Both had failed to produce true equality, freedom and peace. To him, Islam was the answer, but not without radical change. Historical/traditional Islam had to be left behind through re-embracing ahistorical/essential Islam. The only viable outcome for civilisation—where economic, political and social equalities are truly met without coming into conflict with individual freedom—is when it complies with the highest degree of Islam.[1]

Whilst Taha's view on Islam as the solution to civilisational decay opens up interesting ways through which one might reconsider Islam in the light of modernity, this does have several significant drawbacks. To be

sure, some of the latter have been resolved in the development of his ideas in the works of his former student an-Naim. Suffice it to say, the objections are merely technical in nature and not considered as undermining the integrity of his overall arguments, which stand to reason, regardless of how contentious they may be. There are two main parts to his thesis on Islam in relation to civility: historical and modern Islam and Islam as the answer to the challenges faced by humankind in modernity. The first, namely, Taha's idea to distinguish seventh-century context from present-day application of the religion is novel. The problem is that, in order to allow the thesis to make sense, he has to reinterpret the past and reconfigure the nature of Islam extensively. In principle, this raises considerable historiographical concerns, but perhaps less so from an objective standpoint and in relation to his fundamental re-reading of the canon. This is because his hermeneutics—however controversial—is, nevertheless, grounded in a heuristics for social change. The other concern relates to the reading of modernity by Taha and, leaving aside his (mis-)readings of the Marxist position, what he sees to be the failure of Western civilisation to achieve its goal of peace. On one level, his view rightly reflects the political discourse of the era to which he belonged; but the extent to which it faithfully characterises the role of Western powers in terms of geopolitics—in particular relating to the Middle East—is debatable. That he asserts Islam (and not Capitalism, Communism or Marxism) as the source of human salvation brings into sharp focus the problems relating to Islam and civility in this book.

1.3 The Polarity and the Binary in Religion and Politics: Further Theoretical Reflections

The history of religion, broadly conceived, touches on the problematics of the phenomenology of the sacred and the profane—that is, it presents numerous accounts about how that which is other is perceived as manifest in the familiar. By extending this relationship between the sacred and the profane to the monotheistic religions (i.e., the Judaic, Christian and

Islamic), certain subsidiary (and abstract) polarities can be extrapolated for the purposes of analysis. The primary polarity that is of central concern to this book is that between the Eschaton and civility, while related polarities are such as religion and politics, and revelation and reason, all of which—within the context of this study—fall under the banner of Islam and civility. In general terms, the context of the Islamic world is uniquely different to the traditional Christian world setting, in which religion is made categorically to stand ambiguously, if not opposed, to politics, science, individualism and rationalism. Islamic intellectual history develops along the lines of a balance (and sometimes even a fusion) of the religious and the worldly, wherein there is not a polarity of thought between 'religious thinking' and 'political thinking', since Muslim civilisations do not evolve along a trajectory of separation of Church and State. Therefore, the assertion made is that in the Islamic context religion can be found to be at odds—though not opposed—to civility in the course of that history. The Muslim relationship to the worldly is in many ways akin to historical Israelite religion in that it too has in the past strived to shape the world with which it has come into contact. This is to make a broad statement about the modern logic of Muslim/eastern-cum-religionism and Christian/western-cum-scientism mindsets—the latter observed as being prone to dualistic categorisations: religion and politics, religion and science, and religion and rationality. Generally speaking, the binary thinking of the former tends toward geosocial and geopolitical discords such as 'East' versus 'West, 'Islam' versus Capitalism, Islam versus Communism and so on and broadly captured as religion positioned against materialism, consumerism and corporatism.

Contrasting religion and civility, as proposed here, is admittedly a crude distinction. It is, however, one that is theoretically necessary in order to underline the relationship between the two, in the first instance and also, subsequently, in terms of how they are prioritised throughout Islamic history to serve varying purposes at different points of the civilisational timeline. Fundamentally, the point about Islam as a historical phenomenon is that it is representative of a religious tradition that is intensely engaged with the world, that is, society and politics, for the purpose (to be blunt) to dominate it, subdue it and make it Islamic. Indeed, '[o]ne qualification which must be stressed is that Islam is not a

political religion, but a religion that is or may become politically engaged' and it is certainly in the early phase of its history 'a religion that has historically seen political power as part of its religious project' (Milani and Cottle 2018, p. 374). As will be expanded on at length in the subsequent chapter, the mission of Muhammad is one that is defined by the mood of the Eschaton, as conveyed in the early revelations at Mecca—having the full sense of a religious project to sacralise the world. What is encountered, however, later on, by the ninth-century Abbasid era, among the early *falasifa* ('the Muslim Philosophers') is an effort to reconcile religion to civility—though never losing sight of that initial eschatological mood. Throughout the course of Islamic history there are two currents—in view of Hodgson's categorisation ('Islamic' and 'Islamicate')—which represent the Muslim civilisational agenda and the religious enterprise. The basic point herein is to assert that Muslims did not perceive a conflict of interest between civilisational pursuits and their religious identity, and that this only changes with the decline of the State across the Islamic world (due to the rise of the European powers through expansion and commerce and ultimately 'the West').[2]

1.4 The Example of Ibn Khaldun's Macro-History

Before we turn to our exemplary case studies for the purposes of setting the scene, it is important to pause and consider the historical-sociological theory of Ibn Khaldun on the political state of Islam at his time. This relates to civility in an indirect manner, but still in a way which is implicitly significant to any discussion of civility in the Muslim world. We reference Ibn Khaldun's theory in order to further contextualise the notion of civility in Islamic political thought, but more specifically to underline the process of its coming to the awareness of Muslim statesmen.

Ibn Khaldun provides the possibility for a conversation about civility in the Muslim world, and it is precisely because of his theorising that we can consider the notion of a 'proto-civility' in the pre-modern era (this problem will be taken up in the next chapter). Ibn Khaldun makes