A growing body of scholarly work is devoting attention to how Muslim traditions articulate notions that might fit the standards of a modern polity. 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 function of public and 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 imputes 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 ‘representation-intensive’ features of traditional notions of publicness. Several other scholars, however, stressed that also in Western societies the role of punitian 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 committed to the collective goals of the community. Therefore, it should not be missed that reformed religious traditions play a role in the process. It would be impossible to understand the political and legal philosophy embedded in 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 authored newspapers, expanded the list 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 independent identity.

As shown by Michael Gasper, the Islamic reform movement (ishlīḥ) established the boundaries of the ‘society’ on the basis of which the nation-state was defined, including the lines of exclusion and inclusion. The origin of ‘social life’, they saw in properly intended Islamic traditions the cure at hand. A contemporary of Muhammad Abduh (al-Hidma al-Muhammad, 1845-1896), see defined virtue not just in terms of the canonical injunction al-imāra li-bi-l-muʿāruf wa al-nahāla al-murqa (ensuring good and forbidding evil), but as tied to economic development and ‘industriousness’. 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 national unity, but rather, as we shall see, injected into the emergent public Islam foregrounded no less than colonial policies did. The bottom line is that it would be very difficult to define what 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 of public Islam were represented by a few, whereas a larger number of their adherents were not in terms of formulas of citizenship within a civil law setting, but were rooted in the Islamic law, signifies something like ‘Islamic normativity’ or ‘Islamic normative reason’ (at least as used and implemented in the discourse of modern Muslim reform).

Mustafa Mahmud

The principal generator of public moral authority, as a success story of 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 jamiyya (welfare association) in Cairo, and as the author and moderator of a very popular television docuseries series on al-imāra l-imāra (Islam and 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 belonged to the pioneers of Egyptian television, a medium that rapidly spread into middle class households. In the post-Nasser political climate, Islam was forced to adopt, in the rise and transformation of public Islam into a ‘post-modern’ kind of politics of subjectivity, visibility and im- agery, also as do public Islam. More than that, this force of cohesion is exactly what religious-civilizing traditions, as major sources of collective identities, have been in the past and at times long prior to the rise of modern nation-states. Therefore, in the rise and transformation of public Islam one can rather than try to grasp the religious-civilizing traditions justify claims of membership within the community that articulate the tension between individual salvation and social order.

If the Habermasian framework is too narrow to capture the way public Islam is rooted in Islam, the nation-state is neither the framework where the allegedly ritualistic and ‘representation-intensive’ features of traditional notions of publicness 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 various new projects on identity, welfare and justice, and also to focus on the mechanisms of recognition that authorize identity and legitimize visibility. The possi ble ususfulness of a transculturally feasible, post-Habermasian notion of the public sphere that can be applied to the transforma tion of religious traditions and the emergence of a vast array of socio-religious movements, is in helping to frame the platform where various new projects on identity, welfare and justice, and also 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 various new projects on identity, welfare and justice, and also 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 various new projects on identity, welfare and justice, and also 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 various new projects on identity, welfare and justice, and also 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 various new projects on identity, welfare and justice, and also to focus on the mechanisms of recognition that author

Notes

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Cover of al-Islam fi khāndeq, by Mustapha Mahmud.