



# Islam and Modernity

KEY ISSUES AND DEBATES

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# The Reform Project in the Emerging Public Spheres

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## **Introduction: The common good and the public sphere**

The ‘colonial encounter’ with the West eroded the integrity of Muslim majority societies and political formations at various levels (see Chapter 6 in this volume). In a desire to overcome this state of weakness, leading scholars and personalities of the Muslim world claimed that Islamic traditions and institutions did not need to be discarded in order to make space for a modernisation path that would merely imitate Western models. Nobody could deny that the identification of the ‘modern’ with the ‘Western’ resulted from the very success of singularising Western modernity as a global civilisation destined to set the parameters for the social and political development of the Muslim majority world. In the context of a deepening confrontation, the potential of Islam as an autonomous civilising force within the modern colonial framework that Western powers dominated well into the twentieth century was not simply exposed to challenges at the political, military and economic levels. It also depended upon the imposition by the West of standards of cultured and ‘civilised’ behaviour oriented to worldly success and bestowed with a purportedly universal value.

A host of public personalities from within the Ottoman Empire and other parts of the Muslim world attempted to cope with the civilisational hegemony of the West and with what was perceived as the belated development of Muslim societies by instituting a programme of reform intended to revitalise key resources drawn from their scholarly, legal and philosophical traditions. They aimed to invest these resources into a counter-project of modernity that could bear a credible Islamic imprint, in spite of all evident trends of acculturation that accompanied the imbalanced power relationship with the colonial regimes. The Muslim reformers aspired to *reform*, re-energise and reconstruct Islamic traditions to the extent that they provided resources for advancing innovative action and supplying collective cohesion to the social body of Muslim societies, which they saw as severely affected by colonial policies. The reform programme was not a centralised undertaking but the result of a more amorphous movement linking personalities and scholars of the Muslim world under the banner of a common aspiration. Facilitated by new techniques of communication, foremost of which was the printing press, the reform programme took form in the context of the emergence of modern public spheres. A blueprint for reform

was envisaged that targeted not only the specialised personnel or elite of Islamic knowledge (*al-khassa*), but also the common practitioners and the general public (*al-‘amma*). The relations between *al-khassa* and *al-‘amma* and the necessity to address a mass public were integral to these reform ideas.

Since the early 1960s there has been a sustained reflection on the importance of the public sphere within modern Western societies. The public sphere was conceived of as a realm providing both cohesion and spaces of freedom to social actors alongside the two other spheres of economic production and state steering (Habermas [1962] 1989; Negt and Kluge [1972] 1993; Calhoun (ed.) 1992; Fraser 1997; Weintraub and Kumar (eds) 1997; Eisenstadt et al. 2000; Warner 2002). To match this reflection centred on an allegedly exclusive European trajectory, a growing body of literature has since the late 1990s focused on the public sphere as a key arena for reassessing the specific ways through which Islam, intended as an ensemble of traditions and institutions, is carving its space in the modern world (see Schulze [1994] 2000; Stauth (ed.) 1998; Eickelman and Anderson [1999] 2003; Salvatore (ed.) 2001; Hoexter et al. (eds) 2002; Burgat and Esposito (eds) 2003; Salvatore and Eickelman (eds) 2004; Salvatore and LeVine (eds) 2005).

Within this field of research, the most significant nexus linking Islamic traditions to modern societies is represented by the way in which traditional notions of the common good fit into the norms and apparatuses of a modern public sphere. The idea of the common good and the notion of the public sphere are related in complex and significant ways. Ideas and practices targeting the commoners and educating them to the pursuit of the common good often play a role within pre-modern cultural traditions; on the other hand, the public sphere is a key communicative space that supplies meaning and cohesion to modern, especially – but not exclusively – democratic societies. In the mainstream Habermasian account, this ideal function of the public sphere is prefigured in the history of emancipation of the bourgeoisie from the tutelage of the absolutist ruler, a process that was the legacy of the Enlightenment and of the European revolutions. In particular, the ideal-type of the emancipative role of the public sphere, as enunciated by Habermas, is based on the analysis of the period of European history that stretches from the French Revolution of 1789 to the revolutions that took place in several European countries in 1848–9 (Habermas [1962] 1989).

Within this approach to the emergence of modern Western public spheres, it becomes clear that the notion of the common good cannot be considered merely as a relic of an undifferentiated *ancien régime*, where the king was the good shepherd who took care of the well-being of his sheep. The concept of the public sphere envisions a site of discussion and deliberation among moral subjects, transcending their private interests through the dynamics of defining what is the common good of society as a whole. This articulation of the public sphere

is not confined to representative political systems; it is also formed in those social contexts that lack truly representative institutions. Not to be neglected, the build-up of bourgeois public spheres that prepared the pan-European revolutionary eruption of 1848–9 remained a crucial legacy for the political cultures of the societies involved, even if in most countries the revolution was aborted and authoritarian regimes were not subverted, but rather acquired a new populist colouring. Irrespective of the success or failure of movements seeking political transformations, the public sphere plays the role of a crucial socialising arena and communicative relay connecting actors within society not only among themselves but also to the domain of politics. The activities that animate the public sphere range from debates taking place within diverse sites such as coffee houses, literary salons, clubs and religious congregations to the publication of pamphlets and journals. Their immanent goal is to attain a consensual formulation of the common good, intended as a norm to be formulated by free citizens, and not by – however enlightened – despots. The redemption of society from authoritarian rule and from the arbitrary and non-rational character of the latter constitutes a potential political fall-out of the functioning of a public sphere.

The notions and practices associated with the pursuit of the common good and the functioning of the public sphere are intertwined in more complex ways than might appear if we were to contrast them as representing, respectively, a static traditional idea and a modern system for structuring communication within society (see Chapter 1 in this volume). Charles Taylor has added some interesting details to the Habermasian view of the public sphere as the specific site of a type of action (communicative action) that facilitates understanding among actors beyond structures of authority or particularistic interests. Taylor maintains that the rise of a modern public sphere expresses the quintessential capacity of modernity to valorise ordinary, common life. The outcome of the process is the formation of a common space accessible to all members of a given political community. They are free agents basing their actions on autonomously acquired interests and on values that are largely transparent to fellow citizens and therefore debatable. A key characteristic of a modern public sphere appears then to be the reflexive character of the communicative process. The agents are speakers who reflect not only on their own interests and values, but also on their own identity as potentially autonomous agents. On the one hand, they can discover through debate that they share basic values with other individuals; on the other hand, they develop a critical capacity that can find expression through a variety of media of communication (Taylor 1993, 2004).

To sum up, the notion of the public sphere rests on the idea of acting, arguing and deliberating in common in ways that are legitimated through a collective pursuit of the common good, which also implies a fair degree of transparency of communication among the actors involved in the process. If not aimed at

radically reconstructing society on abstract rational bases, the public sphere is nonetheless the arena where ideas of society and the social bond of justice and solidarity are discussed with the goal of reforming society.

In a revised approach to the public sphere, which challenges the alleged exclusivity of Western developmental patterns, lie buried some key layers of traditional notions of the common good. This should not be too surprising. Think of the idea of ‘brotherhood’ as articulating a traditional type of solidarity, often imbued with religious commitment, which was reshaped into ‘fraternity’, the last of the three values written on the banner raised by the French Revolution. According to this revised perspective, it becomes relevant to investigate how the Islamic notion of the common good (*maslaha*) was selectively appropriated by modern Muslim reformers and played out within colonial and post-colonial public spheres. I will show that the idea itself of a ‘reform’ (*islah*) conceived in Islamic terms was ideationally and even semantically close to the Islamic idea of the common good, on the one hand, while it was structurally linked to the changed modalities of communication and mobilisation in the emerging public spheres, on the other.

### **Emerging political formations within colonial modernity**

In tension with the illustrated idea of the common good, a first major leitmotiv of political modernity (see Chapters 1 and 3 in this volume) appears to lie in the issue of differentiation between societal spheres, a process governed by the new forms of power and regulation deployed by the modern state. In the colonial era and in post-colonial settings, this process entailed not only the centralisation and monopolisation of the state’s power on the territory on which it exercises sovereignty, but also, increasingly, the internalisation by the state subjects of the disciplines of the rational agent, usually identified with the *homo economicus* (Mitchell 1988, 2002). In a further step, these subjects reclaim more control on the political process and attempt to compensate the emerging dominance of economic rationales within social relations by mobilising the ties of affection and solidarity implied by the idea of a ‘civil society’ (Norton (ed.) 1995–6; Eickelman and Piscatori [1996] 2004; Salvatore and LeVine (eds) 2005). A second major leitmotiv of political modernity can thus be defined as the simultaneous differentiation and relinking of spheres of social action. The public sphere here represents the arena that gives expression and provides coherence to the aspirations of increasingly autonomous actors within civil society. It is also the key infrastructure that facilitates mediation between traditional notions of the common good and the imperatives of political modernity.

We should then be able to assess the extent to which non-Western configurations of political modernity, under the hegemony of the colonial West, might represent ways of deepening the earlier transformations (see Chapter 1 in this

volume) without fully conforming to – or adopting the conditional compromises with – the rationalities of optimisation of control, pursuit of wealth, centralisation of power and internalisation of discipline that became vectors of modern transformations. Such processes led in Western Europe to a divorce of the exercise of social and political power from its traditional normative bases, and so to a fully-fledged autonomisation of the power machinery of the modern state. Within modern Muslim majority societies, the outcome of the transformation has been varied and ambivalent.

The process of modern state-formation within the Islamic civilisational framework, even in the case of the Ottoman Empire, lacks, in comparison with European prototypes, a fully autonomous legitimation and a radical centralisation of power. Also missing are the institution of a strongly ideological nexus of this centralisation to a determination of individual rights framed in the context of that form of power (first of all, contractual autonomy) and a mechanism to protect and promote individual property like the one supported by the guarantees of the omnipotent ‘Leviathan’ represented by the modern state. While the most modern among the Muslim states, the Ottoman Empire, also strove towards deepening the centralisation of governmental power and was also able to add to its power by astutely managing centrifugal processes (Barkey 2008), it did not acquire the kind of ideologically pinpointed autonomy that the European state attained by appropriating and inverting some of the sacral features of the church (see Chapter 1 in this volume). The reappropriation of the title of Caliph by the Ottoman sultan in the late eighteenth century occurred in the context of a process of retreat, vis-à-vis the Russian Empire, and cannot be equated with an attempt to catch up with the formation of a fully-fledged Muslim Leviathan. More generally, in the Muslim majority world the process of endogenous state-formation was interrupted by colonial encroachments (as in India) or was negatively affected by quasi-colonial pressures (as in the Ottoman Empire and in Iran), which created new, complex conditions for the formation of colonial and post-colonial states.

We need not revisit here the broader issue of political modernity (see Chapter 3 in this volume); rather I provide an assessment of the reasons that induced various personalities affiliated with the broader Islamic reform programme to invest their best energies in a politics *of* the common good *within* the public sphere. This type of programme allowed them to bypass the ongoing strictures of political action and mobilisation that limited citizens’ participation within most colonial and post-colonial formations as well as post-Ottoman Muslim majority polities. I will illustrate how this programme was articulated through a conceptual network finalised to reconciling the tradition of amalgamation of agents’ interests incorporated in notions of the common good with modern norms of differentiation between societal spheres and with a principled autonomy of the modern social agent. In this sense, the politics of the common good retains an

essential ambivalence for being much more than a surrogate to mechanisms of political participation: it was the key to the formation of a largely autonomous arena, the public sphere, which proved suitable for discussing and disseminating ideas of moral cohesion of society.

In spite of the undeniable importance of the Indian subcontinent and of Iran in their confrontation with the imperial expansion of modern European powers, it was the Ottoman Empire to be on the front line of the longer, most direct and, finally, lethal confrontation with modern European hegemonic forces. This cultural hegemony owed as much to colonial enterprises as to the building of academic disciplines that had the non-Western world as their object. The study of the non-Western world was premised on the idea of a common humanity, but was articulated through the bias of a civilisational primacy of the West. The West saw itself as marching towards building a rational society, at the same time as it confronted the purported civilisational deficiency of the others, foremost, of its closest significant other, the Muslim world. In response to this situation, various voices within the reform movement perceived that the insufficient advancements of the Muslim world needed to be explained not by shortcomings of Islamic traditions or of the Islamic civilisation *per se*, but by corrupted interpretations of Islam's message and especially by decadent practices and even superstitions. According to several reformers, a vast array of detestable practices had caused the fading of once well-functioning institutions in key sectors of society such as education and the administration of law. Entertaining a dialogue with the innovating spirit of the most advanced works of Muslim scholars of pre-modern times, and in particular of the Late Middle Ages, was seen by several public personalities as a significant alley to the moral reform of Muslim populations, via the increase of the cultural resources needed to face the changes and challenges of the age. One major theme of the reform programme became the demarcation of a moral field for educating subjects to commit their energies to the resurgence of the *umma*. As formulated by Talal Asad (2003: 226), this theme was concerned with 'how the reordering of social life (a new moral landscape) presented certain priorities to Islamic discursive tradition – a reordering that included . . . a new distinction being drawn between law and morality, and new subjects being formed'.

## Generations of reformers

Significant attempts to reconstruct viable Islamic traditions especially in the field of the law had already been carried forward by a host of variously motivated Muslim leaders during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, prior to the rooting of a reform discourse with clear contours within the emerging public spheres of colonial states. The activities of these early modern personalities span across a variety of regions of the Muslim world, which were

variably affected by the Western colonial expansion. As illustrated by the movements and activities that were initiated and conducted with a variety of means – from intellectual to military – by Shah Waliullah in India (d. 1762), Muhammad b. ‘Abd-al-Wahhab (1703–92) in the Arabian Peninsula, Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817) in territories corresponding to today’s Nigeria, Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (1786–1831) in lands corresponding to today’s Pakistan, Umar Tall (1794–1864) in West Africa, Muhammad b. ‘Ali al-Sanusi (1787–1859) in Cyrenaica and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri (1808–83) in Algeria and in Syria, some late medieval developments in the philosophy of law were recognised as a promising momentum in the chain of Islamic traditions. Most of these reformers *ante litteram* seemed to be equally interested in the conception of *maslaha* of Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388) and in the notion of a *siyasa shar‘iyya* (a governance based on *shari‘a*) of Ibn Taymiyya (1262–1328). They were thus setting the necessary conditions for a framework of reform selectively drawing from traditional resources but concretely implemented on a terrain of confrontation with modern colonial powers. The sufficient conditions for such a reform project were to emerge at a later stage, when the reform discourse became more structured via the intervention of personalities acting in a mature colonial framework and channelling their teachings with the aid of the media of modern public spheres, by addressing in particular educated audiences (Salvatore 2007). Urban reformers took over the task of reconstructing selected components of the Islamic traditions. The dimension of such endeavours can be assimilated to a programme to ground, justify and develop an autochthonous type of modernity: an ‘Islamic modernity’.

In the specific context of both the Ottoman Empire and its splinter adversary represented by the state building project of Muhammad ‘Ali in Egypt (1769–1849), it is not surprising that the reform project was first articulated by personalities intimately linked to the process of administrative reform of the Ottoman and the Egyptian states. Only at a later stage, from the 1860s and 1870s, did a more autonomous class of reformers emerge, when the public arena of Egypt – a country that also attracted personalities from the Mashriq, an area that was still under the control of the Ottoman ruler – became the hub of the reform programme. It is noteworthy that the first editorials, which are considered a key genre in the emergence of a modern public sphere since they address a specific argument in a concise style, appeared within the administrative bulletin *al-waqa‘ al-misriyya* and were authored in 1842 by the leading Egyptian scholar Rifa‘ah Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi (1801–1873). Some of them dealt, quite unsurprisingly, with the relation between *siyasa* (government) and *shari‘a* (Islamic normativity) (al-Kumi 1992: 67–85). The take-off of the Egyptian public sphere as a largely autonomous intellectual and communicative space centred on the printing press of newspapers and periodicals dates back to the 1870s and 1880s and unfolded in parallel with institutional reforms, putting the legal system under increasing state supervision. The emerging public sphere provided the communicative

stage for the formulation of normative claims affecting the ‘redressing’ (this is the core meaning of *islah*’s idea of ‘reform’) both of Muslim subjects and of the *umma* as a whole.

We should bear in mind that, by the time the reform discourse started to be formulated within the emerging public spheres by urban personalities, who were often both thinkers and activists – like Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), Ibrahim Şinasi (1826–1871), Ziya Pasha (1829–1880), Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), Namik Kemal (1840–1888), ‘Abdallah al-Nadim (1845–1896), Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), Qasim Amin (1865–1908) and Rashid Rida (1865–1935) – the Western diagnosis of the inherent deficiencies of Islamic cultural traditions was already gaining currency. One of its chief spokespersons was the French scholar Ernest Renan, who asserted the inherent superiority of Christian over Islamic culture while eliciting the response of al-Afghani, one of the most vocal Muslim reformers of the epoch. At stake was first and foremost the capacity of Islam’s juridical, theological and philosophical traditions to justify the collective pursuit of the common good via adequate means of collective organisation: primarily in the form of a modern statehood, under the assumption that a modern state could not exist without adequate cultural institutions for educating its citizens, inculcating into them a normative sense of commitment to the common good and finally encouraging their attachment to the political community. Reformers were then faced with the task of constructing a shared cultural perspective and of promoting a self-sustaining political determination that was adequate to challenge their Western colonialist counterparts on their own terrain, while relying on key elements of strength preserved and revived within their own intellectual traditions and institutional legacies. This was, in a nutshell, the question of how best to relate culture to power by devising the right blend between the heritage of regional civilisations and cultural traditions, on the one hand, and the modern tools mainly – though not exclusively – associated with the contemporary West, on the other.

The infrastructure of the media and the norms that regulated discourse in the Egyptian public sphere were first determined in the course of the broader transformations of the nineteenth century that witnessed a transition from an autonomous project of state-building based on autarchy and conquest to a colonial regime functioning on the basis of a growing financial control of the country by the major European powers. These changes not only encompassed transformations in the administrative structure and coercive tools of the state, but also provoked a new kind of disjunction between state power and the intellectual arenas of public discourse. One of the reasons for the modernity of *islah* was that it recognised the functional competence of the state and a sort of division of labour between the political class in charge of the government of the land (given by birth and privilege, or recruited through a special career), on the one hand, and the intellectual class held responsible for formulating the tenets of an educational

project targeting the subjects of the state, on the other. Not surprisingly, this disjunction implied a calibrated, but not unconditioned loyalty of the reformers to political authority, which was valid as long as the rulers adequately drew on the educational and disciplining blueprint formulated by the public intellectuals. In this sense, as exemplified by ‘Abduh’s career before and after the ‘Urabi revolt and the imposition of a British protectorate over Egypt in 1881–2, the public sphere was not mainly an arena of anti-colonial agitation, but rather a terrain of cultivation of capacities and dispositions, of an emergent national subjectivity matching the requirements of governance with the collective emancipation from poverty and backwardness. Worth mentioning is that the Islamic reform movement encompassed not only leading personalities like the predominantly scholarly figure of Muhammad ‘Abduh and the mainly populist character of ‘Abdallah al-Nadim, but also lower, socially intermediate layers, like a host of graduates of the new professional schools promoted by the government (Gasper 2001). The public sphere was nurtured by mushrooming clubhouses (with their performance halls, dining spaces, libraries and even museums), charity associations (which developed more traditional services), a printing press and a modern style of public education first addressed to the educated classes but soon to be extended to the ‘masses’, formerly identified as *al-‘amma*.

For our purposes, it remains to evaluate more closely the relation between the key categories that the Muslim reformers drew from the Islamic traditions and reinvested into a modern project. This step also entails an appraisal of how the new infrastructural conditions of communication facilitated by the printing press influenced the normative dimension of public speech, such as the standards for addressing the public, while presupposing a certain moral engagement and disciplining relationship between the public intellectual and his audiences.

### **The conceptual articulation of the reform programme**

The dilemmas faced by the reformers were inherently complex and the solutions contrived were partly contradictory. Of four major key categories within their discourse, the first to mention is the notion itself of *islah*, imperfectly translated as reform. Reformers dismissed several methods and institutions of Islamic traditions in the educational and legal fields, while they wanted to redress and make fit again (this is the closest meaning of *islah*) and not to reject the conceptual apparatus of these traditions. The process cannot be equated to a squeezing of Islamic traditions into modern institutions, by simply discarding what was considered unsuitable to the tasks of a modern state. Much more than that, the emerging state policies could gain coherence and legitimacy only in an epistemological terrain that the emergent public sphere, initially hegemonised by the Islamic reform discourse – also designated (Salvatore and Eickelman (eds) 2004) by the shorthand formula of ‘public Islam – contributed to shape not less than

colonial policies and their conceptual apparatuses (Mitchell 1988; Gasper 2008). By their appeal to a tradition of reform within the broader Islamic tradition, the norms of a modern public sphere were understood by the reformers not as a challenge to the traditions of Islam, but as an apposite disciplining engine for the reproduction and renewal of their knowledge stocks and leadership ambitions (Salvatore 1997: 83–8).

Second in the ranking of categories appears the idea of *maslaha*, originating from the same root as *islah*, *s-l-h*, which denotes being and becoming good, in the sense conveying the full scale of positive values from uncorrupted to right, honest, virtuous and just (Masud [1977] 2000: 135). More specifically, the root meaning of *maslaha* is the ‘cause or source of something good or beneficial’ (Opwis 2005: 182). Scholarly discussions occurring between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries laid the foundation for the conceptual network gravitating around *maslaha*. The main theoretician of *maslaha* was the fourteenth-century Maliki scholar from al-Andalus, Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi. It was especially through the work of al-Shatibi that *maslaha* became a concept that was no longer to be confined to the toolkit of jurisprudence and legal theory, but was one capable of covering a theory of social action and interaction finalised to what we call the ‘common good’ (Salvatore 2007: 156–71). In both classic and modern legal theory, *maslaha* (or in its specification as *maslaha ‘amma*) is strictly linked to the ‘goals of the law’ (*maqasid al-shari‘a*), a concept that is still frequently invoked within the reform-oriented, simultaneously legal and intellectual approach that carries *maslaha* as its banner. We do not need here to look in detail at the different patterns of indebtedness of modern writers on *maslaha* to various classical authors of legal theory (see Opwis 2005). For our purposes it is more important to stress that a renewed emphasis on *maslaha* was intrinsic to the reform approach of leading scholars such as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Earlier literature on the Islamic *islah* has highlighted the role of leading thinkers in their calling for an adaptation of the ulama’s competencies to the new modern constellations, via a reformulation of *shari‘a* (see Kerr 1966). We come here to the third main element of the reform discourse, concerning the place of *shari‘a*. Michael Gasper (2001) has observed that, while Islamic reformers agreed that the *shari‘a* was the principal source of Islamic reason, the increasingly press-based public sphere was the key to establishing some crucial conditions for the use of that reason. The reinterpreted, traditional notion of *maslaha* provided such an ideal condition for several reformers who had to reformulate *shari‘a* and its role. It set the standards for addressing the public by presupposing a specific ethical connectedness between the writer and the public. This approach is exemplified in the release and publication of *fatwas* by Rashid Rida, which had a clearly educational and political intent.

As far as it was used and implemented in the discourse of Muslim reformers,

*shari‘a* should be intended as ‘Islamic normativity’ or ‘Islamic normative reason’ rather than ‘Islamic law’. The reform programme’s emerging view of *shari‘a* had to match the need to bridge the gap between the traditionally revered divine norm and the law, intended as positive and issued from state sovereignty, and in this sense secular. Law was seen as a tool for regulating fields of social behaviour and for disciplining citizens, a view that religious reformers largely shared with state authorities. The dilemma consisted in how to redefine the relationship between a normativity derived from God’s commandments and oriented to the common good represented by *maslaha*, and the institutional legality that was gradually taking root in new codes and the new courts and more generally in the institutional outlook of the colonial state. In the Egyptian case, the reform of the legal system was not considered detrimental to the normativity carried by the *shari‘a*, which Muhammad ‘Abduh and other reformers were attempting to reconstruct. The immanent rules and rewards of the emerging public sphere revolved around press organs representing a variety of political and intellectual currents and not immediately reflecting the views of state authorities (either indigenous or colonial). Such patterns regulated the tension between the abstract divine law that the reformers saw as imperfectly incorporated in the historic corpus of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), on the one hand, and positive state law originating from an increasingly distinct, modern process of legislation, on the other. The process itself of public communication diluted or delayed the perception of a possible gap.

In the context of such an emerging ‘public Islam’, *ijtihad* represents a fourth key category of the reform project. Traditionally, it was the faculty to endeavour to find original solutions to given legal issues. In the context of *islah*, it was understood by reformers as a largely supra-legal method for channelling the participation of Muslims in discussions of issues of common interest by fostering an autonomous capacity to propose solutions. Therefore it also became a tool to foster a moral discipline of the citizenry and to establish a new normative consensus in the public sphere. Rashid Rida ([1922] 1988: 115–16) went so far in the redefinition of *ijtihad* as to affirm that each Muslim should be a *mujtahid*, a practitioner of *ijtihad*. As Skovgaard-Petersen (1997: 65–79) has put it, for the Muslim reformers *ijtihad* was not merely permitted, but obligatory, thus constituting an essential part of the public personality of the Muslim subject to be reformed.

Rida inherited, updated and radicalised the project of the *islah* of Muhammad ‘Abduh (mainly via their common project, the journal *al-Manar*) by putting an unprecedented emphasis on the centrality of the printing press within the reform project. He even claimed the genuinely Islamic character of the enhanced circulation of ideas facilitated by a modern press, which he praised as a formidable instrument for fulfilling the canonical injunction of ‘commanding good and prohibiting evil’ (*hisba*) and as a unique stimulator of *ijtihad* on a mass

basis. Essentially, the reformulation of *maslaha* by ‘Abduh and Rida consisted in its transfer from the realm of *‘ilm*, by definition monopolised by the ulama, to the field of *sihafa*, the press, as the axis of a reform-oriented public sphere (Hamzah 2009). By originally combining a focus on welfare with its public relevance (as well as, by reflex and necessity, with the public dimension of the new press media in use), *maslaha* ended up legitimising this renewed emphasis on *ijtihad*, in spite of the fact that this centrality was still questioned by several scholars belonging to the ulama ranks.

## A public Islam?

For Muslim reformers, the new discourse of *shari‘a*, though focused on the building of a new moral subject, was not necessarily absorbed into a clear-cut moral field severed from the domain of state law. The way the tenets of *shari‘a* were communicated in the public arena caused its implosion into a normative kernel that could permanently feed back into the public educational process. This process can be profitably framed in terms of the emergence of a ‘public Islam’, to be understood as a dimension of public communication that also incorporates a disciplining programme for the benefit of the Muslim subject/citizen. As formulated by Talal Asad (2003: 225), while it is mistaken to assume ‘that modernity introduced subjective interiority into Islam, something that was previously absent’, the conceptual arsenal of reformers could build upon moral ideas of the responsible individual to institute norms for schooling and disciplining the modern citizen. Asad quotes the example of the public reformer Qasim Amin, who fought to enhance the role of women within Muslim society. According to Amin (2003: 235), ‘it is allowed to the ruler who cares for public welfare to prohibit polygyny, conditionally or unconditionally, according to what he sees as suitable to public welfare’. Quite suitably, Asad’s translation of *maslaha* as it is used at a mature stage of the reform discourse by a particularly radical reformer is no longer simply ‘common good’. It becomes possible to override the permission of polygamy in the name of a generalised sense of ‘public welfare’ that can be framed in Islamic terms. Such terms still conform to the traditional nexus between the morality of individual conduct and the specific strength of enforceable law, now undoubtedly in the hands of the colonial, modernising state. Yet it should also be noted that individual responsibility is not framed in terms of the moral autonomy and irreducible freedom of the agent, contemplated by the Habermasian blueprint of the public sphere and more generally by the normative programmes of Western modernity. In contrast to this fundamental difference, the public Islam of the reformers resembles the European public spheres on a crucial level. In tension with the rationale of the modern state that affirms its sovereignty by severing the realm of state law from the domain of inwardness and morality, the logic of the emergence of the

public sphere in Western Europe was premised on the implementation of a collective will finalised to reinstitute a significant nexus between the previously separated domains of morality and law. In the process of modern state formation, the first autarchic phase was followed by a period of colonial encroachment and dependent development. During this period, the Egyptian public sphere was hegemonised by reformers. Though fragile and dependent – as a ‘third sphere’ of society – from the bureaucratic dimension of state formation and from the capitalist market, this public sphere provided a space of moral reasoning and, potentially, critique. In this space a reliance on the discursive and legal traditions of Islam was a possible and often effective option, in order to capture the attention and consensus of the growing strata of civil servants, the teachers and graduates of the new schools, along with older segments of the cultural elite. Reinstating a nexus between morality and the law became an effective formula for gaining attentive audiences.

The public Islam that took shape in the colonial era reflects modern forms of institutionalisation of social governance ambivalently matched by reformed ideas drawn from Islamic traditions. These forms were supported by the print media through mechanisms of communication comparable with those conceptualised within Western social theory as the ‘public sphere’, a construct strictly related to the rise of the modern state. Yet reconceptualising Islamic normativity in terms that could fit the positive law of the modern state was like squaring the circle. It assumed the impossible acceptance of the modern state as the sole instance of a public and rational concern for the common good, and as the exclusive machine to implement it. Nonetheless, the main scope of the reform project was clear: reformers sought to retrieve and valorise those components of the Islamic tradition that affirmed the centrality of human reason and the acceptability of the law in ways that could be accessible to the common people (*al-‘amma*). In this sense, the popularity among several reformers of the traditionally controversial notion of *maslaha* was not just due to the fact that this concept seemed suitable to facilitate a rational concern for the common good, but also because it promised a focus on the method for its efficient communication.

A partly different picture emerges from parallel developments in the core of the Ottoman Empire, until its collapse and the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Within such a trajectory, which was marked not by direct colonial rule but by an increasing pressure to conform to European parameters of state organisation and knowledge production, the shaping of public Islam assumes an even more ambivalent profile. As a first marker of difference from Egypt and other Arab parts of the Empire, it should be noted that most of the nineteenth-century reformers came out of the Ottoman bureau of translation and correspondence with European states. This feature created a higher level of interpenetration between administrative reforms and the intellectual reform project in the public sphere. Contrary to an enduring prejudice among

comparative political sociologists (see Nafissi 2006), the Ottoman state was not a mere reiteration of older patrimonial regimes, but managed to institute a distinctive balance between the otherwise rival ranks of the ulama (*'ilmiyye*) and the scribal class feeding into the state bureaucracy (*kalemiyye*). The Ottoman reform programme known under the banner of *tanzimat* was inaugurated in the 1830s and was framed in the sober, pragmatic and even positivistic language of the bureau of translation, which reflected a concern for the dissemination of meaning in vernacular forms while keeping principled neutrality on matters of religion administered by the ulama. Successive reform packages embraced the realm of education and the legal field (Mardin 2006: 124–34).

On the other hand, it is also possible to see the culture of Ottoman bureaucratic reformers as not completely neutral towards specific traditions, if we were to count *adab* (*edep* in Ottoman Turkish) as a parallel tradition inherited from the legacy of Persianate court culture and distinct from the Islamic tradition of the ulama. The most general definition of *adab* would be the ensemble of the ethical and practical norms of good life, ideally cultivated by a class of literati in the context of a court culture. As such it was a tradition central to Islamdom, intended as Islamic civilisation, more than to Islam, in the strictest meaning of a religious tradition (see Chapter 1 in this volume). The cultivation of this tradition became particularly strong in the Ottoman Empire at the passage to the modern era and provided the background culture to the scribal class, which, especially from the eighteenth century, assumed the profile and reflected the ambitions of an increasingly modern bureaucracy. If we count *adab* as integral to Islamic traditions intended in the widest sense of the word, we can detect a longer line of cultural continuity providing a background to the *tanzimat* reforms, before the shift to the synthesis performed by the sultan and caliph Abdulhamid II from the 1870s, which was more explicitly focused on Islamic slogans and motifs. The work of leading Ottoman reformers such as Namik Kemal and Ziya Pasha cannot be understood without placing their discourse in the framework of this parallel tradition, which allowed them to defend Islam as compatible with modern systems of government and organisation of society.

The theory of the 'circle of justice' that legitimised the authority of the sultan on the basis of a non-corporatist notion of the state, long before he rediscovered – during a crisis time in the late eighteenth century – the caliphal title, is a distinctive leitmotif of the *adab* literature, which did not clash with Islam, but configured a notion of 'Islamic justice' not primarily controlled by the ulama. The 'circle of justice' was not just finalised to legitimising power but was also the source of reflexive thought, as exemplified by the critical pamphlets published in earlier periods of crisis of the empire. At least since the eighteenth century the well-rooted culture of *adab* provided a formula for building moral subjectivities among the higher echelons of the bureaucracy, whose members often doubled their administrative competences with the cultivation of letters.

Based on the influence of this parallel tradition, in the trajectory of the longer nineteenth century within the centre of the Ottoman Empire, Islam was reconceived as a rational religion in probably stronger ways than religious reformers in Egypt and in the Mashriq were willing to do. In the trajectory of the late Ottoman Empire, which anticipates several developments of the Turkish Republic, the state appears as more than a mere machinery for the rationalisation of society. The radical reform approach of social engineering, popular among some Ottoman reformers, was also supported by an ethos and symbolic representation of the public good. In this public sphere, a recombination of the previously competing traditions of the *'ilmîyye* and the *kalemîyye* produced an original public culture that provided the background to the mature reform project of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Neither was the recombination of the two traditions, *adab* and *shari'a* – civility and lawfulness – a unique development of the centre of the Ottoman Empire. In Egypt too the discourse of *islah* was framed in terms of a tension between the notions and rationalities incorporated within various Islamic traditions, and the modern norms and disciplines of a centralising state. 'Abdallah al-Nadim, a committed Muslim reformer, was also one major disseminator of *adab*. This concept acquired a meaning close to 'civility', understood as an ensemble of moral dispositions embracing tact, good manners and mastery of the self as well as of social circumstances, and resting on the idea of 'social commerce' between Egyptians and foreigners. It also incorporated an ethic of respect for the sensibilities of the members of other autochthonous, but non-Muslim religious communities (Christians and Jews). Though still far from articulating a coherent notion of citizenship, *adab*, understood as shared civility and social commerce, was instrumental to the first attempts to articulate a modern, autonomous notion of 'society', intended as a collective body whose members are assigned functionally differentiated tasks (Farag 2001). The restraint from religious fervour that characterised the *adab* propagated by even a combative Muslim reformer like al-Nadim did not, however, diminish the emphasis on the centrality of religious norms. While in the first half of the nineteenth century al-Tahtawi could still be seen as a champion of the disciplining impetus of an autarchic yet modern state formation, al-Nadim was able to build up his role as a leading public educator by acknowledging the Western challenge, while developing a consciously antagonist stance based on a reforming public Islam. The bottom line is that it would be very difficult to prove that the emergence of public Islam was either purely functional or merely reactive to the process of social differentiation or nation-state formation.

The autonomisation of a modern field of morality tied up to the civilising process hegemonised by the West did not automatically undermine traditional disciplines and practices; it rather displaced the relative impact of the latter on the reformers' reconstruction of a Muslim self. It also enhanced the awareness

of the importance of situating the vital components of Islamic traditions within the emerging dynamic of the making of a nation state. The result was a tension – though not an irresolvable one – between being a Muslim subject and a member of the nation (at due time a ‘citizen’). The ‘invention of tradition’ embedded in the public sphere of civility and *adab* superimposed the reformers’ intervention upon still effective lines of tradition. This relation was also a process of ‘translation’, and therefore reflected relations of power (Asad 1993: 171–99), something of which the most acute and combative spirits among the reformers – such as al-Nadim – were well aware.

## Conclusion

Against the background of the historic Western ‘model’ of modern transformations – which, far from following a smooth evolutionary path marked by a progressive rationalisation of social relations, economic behaviour and political organisation, was characterised by complex, contradictory and even antinomian tendencies – the idea of ‘multiple modernities’ has been proposed by authors such as Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Charles Taylor. This concept can facilitate the study of transformative trajectories in non-Western civilisational realms where the break with tradition is not so radical and where a stronger continuity of method and concepts is kept alive – both because of a different cultural logic and because the constraints to respond to Western hegemony made a recourse to tradition both popular and, within limits, useful.

Such an approach stressing conceptual reformulations more than radical breaks could be applied to the reformers’ work on the classic notion of *maslaha*. A stress on change within longer lines of tradition might be seen as compatible with Habermas’s approach to communicative action, if the latter is smoothed out of some theoretical angles and purified of excesses of abstraction. Along these lines, Muhammad Khalid Masud has defined the public sphere as a potential arena of social and political reform, which the modern media and mass education have helped to create, and where public debates on issues of common concern, based on updated views of *maslaha*, are taking place. Within such public spheres a plurality of voices is enacted, and a corresponding fragmentation – yet not exhaustion – of traditional authority takes place. For example, it is not only the ulama as experts of *shari‘a*, but also lay members of the society who publicly discuss *shari‘a*-related matters.

In such discussions, crucial questions are raised about the definition itself of *shari‘a* and the role of traditional religious authorities vis-à-vis modern mechanisms of governance within the institutional framework of a modern state. Where a critique is formulated, it is often through a discourse invoking key tenets and authorised interpretations of Islam. While such challenges differ from a secularist critique in the Western sense – that is, one radically questioning

the legitimacy of religious tenets in public life – they are seldom dominated by a static religious orthodoxy either. The type of ‘publicness’ of the public Islam initiated by the reform discourse does not presuppose the type of secularity that was specific to West European experiences, nor the concomitant sharp deconstruction of the authority of tradition rooted in the church as an institution, as performed in particular by late Enlightenment thinkers (Masud 2005). There is a common basis of modern values, incarnate in culture and communication, which the public Islam of the reformers and of several other modern actors claiming Islamic credentials share with non-Islamic counterparts who are not radical secularists.

Within a horizon of ‘multiple modernities’, comparing the configurations of public spheres and the role of religiously inspired discourses and organised collective action therein might provide a more suitable terrain for assessing trajectories of political modernity than referring to the advancement of state formation and its degree of approximation to liberal-democratic models. Not to forget, secular power in its modern state form only gradually reached a certain stability in Western Europe in the course of the twentieth century and particularly after the Second World War and is therefore an unsuitable standard for a comparative investigation. Yet the issue of the nature of the state and of its sources of legitimacy vis-à-vis religion cannot be evaded. Contests in the various public spheres reflect the diversity, multiple articulation and internal contestability of civilisational legacies. They also affect concepts of state sovereignty, which even the most staunchly modernist among Muslim reformers have been reluctant to consider ethically superior to the differentiated patterns of allegiance entailed by Islam, like those linking local communities to the global *umma*.

On the basis of a redefined terrain of ‘multiple modernities’ and as part of the search for a proper dimension articulating an ‘Islamic modernity’ (or of various ‘Islamic modernities’) therein, reform programmes in the public sphere retain a particular importance not only for illustrating the practical conditions for the autonomy of self and the limitations to the open and rational character of public discourse but also for resonating with the post-independence developments of several Muslim majority societies. In other words, there are promising margins in the theoretical approach to the public sphere for accommodating both the ‘public Islam’ proposed by Muslim reformers and the more conflicted public entanglements of Islamic discourse in the conundrum of state and local politics found even in the often problematic post-colonial scenarios of the Muslim majority world.

It is against such a background where a specific complexity of the post-colonial Muslim world comes to sight that Masud (2005: 156–7) argues that the Western experience is not *per se* universally normative: synthetically put, ‘societies whose political economies differ considerably from those of the West may practice communicative action and construct public reason differently

from the West'. The problem with the Western monopolisation of universalism and therefore also the danger of erecting a Western type of public sphere to an absolute standard of common rationality of social life, reside in the historical determinism and social evolutionism modelled on specifically, often parochially conceived Western historical trajectories. Muslim reformers are not innocent of this simplification, since they have often oscillated between an apologetic attitude (affirming that Islam is better than the West, and that indeed what is good in the West is taken from Islam) to a sell-out, blind attitude towards the resources of their own traditions, based on the belief that change in a direction dictated by the hegemonic parameters of Western modernity is inevitable and does not need painful cultural mediations. The consequence is that, by trusting the force of positive law in conjunction with authoritarian state interventions, too many reform attempts in post-colonial Muslim societies have not been premised on an adequate public discussion and attainment of consensus.

## Summary of chapter

The notion of the public sphere rests on the idea of citizens acting, arguing and deliberating together within settings that presuppose that their aim is the ethical pursuit of the common good. Activity within such a sphere requires a fair degree of transparency of communication among the actors involved in the process.

The idea of the public sphere is at the same time culturally embedded and comparable across various civilisations. The way a sense of the public contributes to social life varies considerably, depending on the modalities of transaction over the definition of the common good, on shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, on background notions of personality, responsibility and justice, but also on the degree of legitimacy of existing states and their capacity to control or repress autonomous public sphere dynamics.

Such an enlarged focus on the genesis of public spheres opens the door to a comparative look at various trajectories of their emergence within civilisations situated outside the Western core of modernity. There is a historical conjuncture that is particularly important for the study of Muslim public spheres. It relates to the period when a group of reformers from several parts of the Muslim world started to draw on the legacy of earlier scholars in order to institute a Muslim ethics of participation in the political community via new media of public communication, first of all newspapers and periodicals. The emergence of this prototype of a modern Muslim public sphere dates back to the late nineteenth century. Subsequent instances of such a public sphere still draw on that seminal experience.

The reform discourse in the public sphere contributed to creating a public ethic of citizenship by selectively drawing on key concepts belonging to Islamic traditions. Particularly important are five categories underlying the discourse of Muslim reformers and acquiring partly new meanings: *islah* (reform), *maslaha* (common good), *shari'a* (normativity), *ijtihad* (autonomous reasoning) and *adab* (civility).

The dynamic of the reform project in the emerging public spheres of Muslim societies supports the idea that one should look at a specific trajectory of emergence of a modern social and communicative space like the public sphere in a given

civilisational context, rather than measuring for the public sphere of a given country or set of countries the degree of its convergence towards or divergence from a purportedly universal model drawn from specific Western historic experiences. The analysis of the emergence of modern public spheres in an Islamic context benefits, therefore, from being framed in terms of the theoretical approach to multiple modernities.

## Questions

1. What is the relationship between traditional concepts of the common good and the functioning of modern public spheres?
2. Is this relationship the same in the Muslim world as in the West, or is it different?
3. What was the specific strategy of Muslim reformers to formulate and, if allowed, implement their visions of the common good in the context of modern public spheres?
4. What was the relation between morality and critique therein?
5. What was the specific infrastructure enabling late Ottoman reformers (and their Egyptian counterparts) to develop and communicate their ideas?
6. To what extent was the intellectual reform programme related to the administrative reforms that were executed in the colonial and post-colonial states?
7. What was the place of the *shari'a* in the discourse of reformers and how did it relate to the concept of legal reform in the emerging nation states?
8. What does the author mean by 'public Islam'? Is this an inherently modern concept, or is such a public Islam thinkable in a pre-modern setting?

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