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PUBLIC ISLAM AND THE COMMON GOOD

Dale F. Eickelman
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The article discusses the historical and contemporary emergence of a sense of an Islamic public in a variety of Muslim majority societies and elsewhere. These manifestations of "public Islam" facilitate discussions concerning how to define the common good, equitable solutions to collective problems, shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and practices that encourage the emergence of a "public" Islam. Compared to notions of public sphere developed within Western social theory, the article shows that the public sphere is no prerogative of Western modern societies nor of democratic political systems. The study demonstrates that also semi-formal and informal articulations of Muslim identities can facilitate the emergence of public, and therefore accountable, forms of Islam.
KEYWORDS: public sphere, civil society, accountability, Islam.

Now more than ever, secular and religious Muslims have to confront issues concerning "public Islam and the common good" in open and public debate.¹ Colombia may still lead the world in the number of deaths directly attributable to terrorism, but the events of September 11, 2001, the October 2002 bombings in Bali, the May 2003 "kamikaze" attacks in Saudi Arabia and Morocco, and the staccato repetition of bombings and violence elsewhere, including Jerusalem, Baghdad, Gaza, Madrid, London, and Ayodhya, test the limits of civility and trust. Ironically, "kamikaze" has become one of the first Japanese words to enter educated Arabic usage. It is the word of choice in Moroccan newspapers and transnational Arabic-language newspapers such as *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), offering an alternative to calling the perpetrators of such attacks either "martyrs" or "suicide bombers."

It is important to look beyond immediate – and often disturbing – events and to discern the long-term trends and developments likely to shape world politics for years to come. Only a tiny minority of Muslims use or condone terrorism in the name of religion, although many have seen it as a weapon of the weak. Apologists find a ready stock of counterpart examples among Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and followers of other religions. The actions of these few, however, have captured the imagination of a global political community and altered the sense of political threat. In this context, it is unsurprising that political trends in the Muslim majority world are often violent and contradictory, due in part to the authoritarian regimes of many states. "Public Islam" – a concept intimately related to the new media and to contemporary senses of belonging –

¹ This article is adapted from the chapter "Muslim Publics" from our book *Public Islam and the Common Good* (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004: 3-27).

is not itself immune from such contradictions, but for the most part it works against violence.

Advancing levels of education, greater ease of travel, and the rise of new communications media throughout the Muslim-majority world contribute to the emergence of a public sphere in which large numbers of people, and not just an educated, political, and economic elite, want a say in political and religious issues. The result has been challenges to authoritarianism, the fragmentation of religious and political authority, and increasingly open discussions of issues related to the “common good” (*al-maslaha al-‘amma*). At the same time, this trend has been uneven and often contradictory.

“Public Islam” refers to the highly diverse invocations of Islam as ideas and practices that religious scholars, self-ascribed religious authorities, secular intellectuals, Sufi orders, mothers, students, workers, engineers, and many others make to civic debate and public life. In this public capacity, “Islam” makes a difference in configuring the politics and social life of large parts of the globe, and not just for self-ascribed religious authorities. It makes this difference not only as a template for ideas and practices but also as a way of envisioning alternative political realities and, increasingly, in acting on both global and local stages, thus reconfiguring established boundaries of civil and social life. Not all these trends are unique to the modern world. One can read Michael Cook’s (2000) majestic account of “commanding right and forbidding wrong” in Islamic thought, a study that flows from the early Islamic centuries to the present, as an account of an engagement including both Muslim jurists and a wider Muslim public with issues of community concern and conduct. Such concerns have been profoundly shaped by the course of history and the idea of the past in the Muslim majority world.

Many of the emerging new voices and the leaders of movements within the proliferating public space of the contemporary Muslim world—a social location which is simultaneously physical and communicative—claim to interpret or be inspired by basic religious texts and ideas, and work in local or transnational contexts. These new interpreters of how religion shapes, or should shape, societies and politics, like their counterparts in Poland’s Solidarity movement and the liberation theology movements in Latin America in the 1980s, often lack the theological and philosophical sophistication of the religious scholars of earlier eras who previously led such discussions. Such new leaders and spokespeople have nonetheless succeeded in capturing the imagination of large numbers of people. These trends often intensify the ties that bind Muslim communities in the Muslim-majority world with Muslims in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world.

The issues and themes in Muslim politics increasingly transcend the specifics of region or place. Thus the contemporary “publicization” of Islam is often more commonly rooted in practice than in formal ideology (Adelkhah 2002).

It has often created new social spaces, a trend significantly accelerated since the mid-twentieth century, and it has facilitated modern and distinctively open senses of political and religious identity.

Such practices and the resulting social spaces involve both emotional and intellectual engagement among participants in overlapping circles of communication, solidarity, and the building of bonds of identity and trust. Some of these practices are based on local communities. Others are geographically widespread and targeted to receptive audiences. One example is the use of e-mail among the Indonesian university students who coordinated the nationwide campus protests that contributed to the downfall of President Suharto in 1998. These modern practices and new communication technologies create new, effective, and geographically more dispersed bases for effective mobilization—but they can also threaten tolerance and civil society by facilitating publicity and calls to action by extremist groups (Hefner 2003).

Social practices that are based on ideas of the common good and that contribute to shaping public Islam include collective rituals, such as popular festivals and religious and secular commemorations. They also encompass disciplining and performative practices as diverse as Sufi rituals, regional pilgrimages, the informal economy, the routines of modern schooling, and the use of the press and modern communications technologies.

Prevailing theories of modernity and modernization in the mid-twentieth century assumed that religious movements, identities, and practice had become increasingly marginal, and that only those religious intellectuals and leaders who attached themselves to the nation-state would continue to play a significant role in public life. These assertions concerning the eclipse of religion in the public life of North America and Europe may have been exaggerated. José Casanova (1994) was one of the first to note that by the late 1970s this prevalent view was challenged by the impact of several parallel developments: the Iranian revolution, the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the role of liberation theology in political movements throughout Latin America, and the return of Protestant fundamentalism as a force in American politics. In the Muslim majority world, however, the role of religion in social and community life never receded. This does not mean that it did not change and develop in ways often underemphasized by Western observers and by Muslims themselves (Zaman 2002). Only in the last decade has the idea of an “Islamic public sphere”—*Islamische Öffentlichkeit* in German—come to the fore in contexts that Reinhard Schulze (2000 [1994]), responding to the work of Jürgen Habermas, discerned as forming the infrastructure of communication and discourse of a new intellectual class, from the classic era of Islamic reform in the late nineteenth century through the structural transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, and the present.

Ideas of the common good are not an immutable heritage of religious or normative traditions, even if some Muslim spokespersons claim otherwise. They

are defined by ethical notions and social values contested and redefined through interaction, practice, and transmission over generations. Sectarianism in Christian Europe provided the habitus and the congregational form for developing such ideas and practices, and it is possible to see in the Sufi tradition and other Muslim religious practices a similar contribution to learning to participate in the public sphere, but also the limits of such participation and to the idea of the public sphere itself. Like the Christian sects, the more orthodox forms of Sufism and other styles of public piety have also contributed to shape reasoning selves and to reconfigure the relationship between legitimate authority and independent pursuit of truth. Immanuel Kant was not born in Iraq; public reasoning has, however, a long tradition in Islamic jurisprudence, both Sunni and Shi'a, that flourished in Iraq and inspired modern Islamic reform.

Various sectarian movements in Europe played a major role in developing the idea of the modular self, empowered with a moral conscience and confronting the authority both of established religion and the state (Casanova 1994). In this European trajectory, only when the freedom of individual conscience is recognized and tolerated can a public sphere develop. It is, nonetheless, a more general argument that religious ideas and practice can foster the emergence of the public sphere, and this has taken place in the Muslim-majority world.

Ideas of the public are historically embedded and have strong links with culturally shared senses of self and community. They are situated at the strategic intersection between practice and discourse. Public Islam is a concept by which we encompass non-elite practices and interactions and their pre-modern antecedents. Its development includes challenge over the authority to interpret sacred texts and changes how issues are framed. The shared sense of public built into these social interactions varies considerably from place to place and time to time, as issues of individual responsibility, welfare, justice, and piety are contested and in flux.

How do these developments match views of the public sphere premised on the existence of a religiously neutral, indeed "secular" threshold of access to public debate? Some ideas of "secular" divest participants in public exchanges of their religious and cultural identities, or at least marginalize these identities. But the creation of a public culture promoting exchange and discussion can involve deliberation over issues of common interest, through the invocation of traditions of religious, moral, and legal discourses. It can also encourage the gradual emergence of ever more abstract patterns of membership and citizenship that rest on obligations and rights which increasingly fit a legal vocabulary and a contractual view of society. Such developments, including the discontinuities between tradition and modernity created by the emergence of a "culture of publicness," have been the focus of interest of political philosophers, social scientists, and historians alike. It suffices here to mention such diverse authors as Giambattista Vico, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Alexis de Tocqueville,

Ferdinand Tönnies, and John Dewey. These thinkers have concentrated on developments in Europe and North America, developments that are specifically Western in our view but that they regarded as exemplary of universal trends.

In spite of the growing recognition that religion has an important role to play in public life and can contribute to the common good, it remains necessary to challenge the common assumption that secularism and secularly oriented practical rationality is the exclusive normative base for “modern” public life (Eickelman 2000, Salvatore 1997; 2000). Religious thought and practice in the Muslim world can be shown to inspire rational-practical orientations as much as do secular approaches to social action. Some practices, including Sufi (mystical) disciplines, interact and sometimes clash with different forms of secularism as incorporated in the ideologies and practices of most states within Muslim-majority societies or where Muslim minorities live.

For both the nineteenth century and the contemporary era, it is possible to identify the norms of exchange and discourse that are the product of these interactions and clashes, and also the creation of a variety of explicit and implicit Muslim forms of civility and publicness. This in turn requires an effort to discern the social history, or genealogy, of the emergence of a sense and structure of public communication and participation in societies shaped by Muslim cultural, religious, and political traditions.

The present period differs from earlier ones in the speed, intensity, and large numbers of people involved in pushing the contours of tradition, but the publics of an earlier era were equally engaged in doing so. The reshaping of religious identity and forms of communication and publicness in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire is especially important in this respect. Consider, for example, Istanbul, a city inhabited by a religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse population in which Muslims were outnumbered for a good part of the Ottoman era. The most commonly held assumption is that the confessional communities of the empire lived separately, with minimal reciprocal interaction, and developed social bonds and allegiances exclusively within their own communities. This assumption diverts an appreciation of the mobile and relational aspect of community relations in Ottoman Istanbul, and it says little about the people’s sense of identity and of collective allegiance. Understanding the ongoing transformations of the Ottoman Empire from the nineteenth century to the present can facilitate a better grasp of the possibilities for change in the contemporary Muslim majority world (see, for example, Meeker 2002, and Cinar 2005).

The collective historical experience of coexistence among Muslims and non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire can be analyzed on the basis of their common interests as members of a vibrant society. In India, the relation between Hindus and Muslims is crucial to the development of ideas of secularism and religiosity in relation to the public sphere. In such an historical and interreligious

perspective, the forms of public Islam in the twentieth century appear as contingent crystallizations of much more complex historical processes. For example, imperial encounters have been of great importance to the historical development of public debate in the metropole as well as the colony—a circumstance that the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 brought once again to light.

Notwithstanding this diversity of experience, most Muslims share inherited conceptions of ideas of the common good. These shared ideas of the past shape contemporary understandings of publicness in Muslim societies (see Eickelman and Salvatore 2002). For example, although Islamic religious scholars, the ulama, claim that God reveals the ideas of the common good to humankind, they also regard these ideas as discernable primarily by themselves—men with expertise in the science of scriptural hermeneutics. These religious scholars debate vigorously among themselves about what the common good entails. Moreover, they are rarely the only participants in this debate. Their authority remains strong in the modern world, but is increasingly challenged by alternative religious—and political—authorities that often lack formal training in the traditional religious sciences.

The increasing accessibility of the new media, including satellite television, the Internet, and new uses of older media such as video- and audiocassettes and CDs contributes to fragmentation of the traditional structures of religious authority. It also facilitates innovative ideas of religious authority and of representing Islam in public in unexpected ways (Gonzalez-Quijano 2003; Hefner 2003). There are numerous combinations of fragmented and sustained old and new forms of religious authority and influence in the public sphere, making debates about what constitutes “good” or authentic Islam much more competitive than has been the case in the past.

One of the paradoxes of modern Muslim publics is that despite this discursive expansion in many Muslim-majority states and communities, the public good is increasingly defined within the parameters of Islam. Some states, such as republican Turkey, vigorously sought to domesticate and neutralize Islamic institutions and ideas, yet current Turkish politics are defined by a mutual accommodation and tacit bargaining, as the guardians of secularism and those who participate in Turkey’s public sphere and civic life learn to accommodate one another through public debate and practice (White 2002). As Adelkhah (2004) suggests for Iran, the most powerful part of the women’s movement is not formal and recognized organizations, all monitored and repressed by the state, but women’s activities in the informal economy and in shaping religious practices. As in the French revolution, Adelkhah argues that such “informal” activities can be at least as powerful a vehicle for changing gender roles and ideas of Islam as explicit ideological statements and formal organizations. In all cases, Islamic ideas of the common good shift in content and elaboration over time and, despite explicit denials, may often converge with Western understandings

of such major issues as democracy and tolerance for religious diversity (Hefner 2000; Sulaiman 1998). Thus the role of Islam in shaping understandings of the common good is unlikely to recede in importance in the years to come.

Muslims participate in crafting the idea of the common good in a variety of ways, and they also contribute to shaping the definitions of wider and more inclusive public goods in societies where Muslims are not a majority, as in Europe (Khosrokhavar 1997; Kepel 1997 [1994]); or, as in Syria and Turkey, they are confronted with a profoundly secular elite; or, as in Iran, with an increasingly unpopular, although powerful, clerical elite (Adelkhah 2004). In India, Muslims live in a secular state strongly buffeted by religious extremism (van der Veer 1994).

Such historically known and contemporary debates argue against efforts to find a single, overarching idea of the common good shared by all Muslim societies, even if some ideologues—both those claiming to represent Islam and those attacking it—make such essentializing claims. It is often the case that such debates or conflicts about what “good” or “true” Islam entails disrupt implicit or even camouflaged conceptions of the public sphere, as in many communities throughout the Muslim world. The analyses of these debates and the contexts in which they occur throw into relief competing claims to speak in public, revealing threads of consensus and points of divergence or rupture.

The participation of religious authorities in public religious debate cannot be understood without an analysis of the audiences to which their discourses are directed and the elements that connect the followers of religious leaders to their persona. The new media, including sermons on tape, popular journals, and local radio broadcasts, may combine with more conventional media (including gossip or published fatwas, or religious interpretations) to widen spheres of participation and make them more complex. The degree to which the participation or influence of these new audiences alters conceptions and implementation of the common good, however, is a question that must always be asked rather than assumed (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002: 105-10). New authorities or speakers emerge in the space between the state and more traditional religious authorities, and thus come to represent alternative points of power.

Religious authority can be an essential part of the construction of public religious discourse in many different ways. For example, the participation of Sufis in public religious debate combines modern forms of conceptualizing and presenting religious arguments with membership in a hierarchical and intensely personalized religious framework. The public articulation of the common good does not require the equality of all participants in order to raise a claim to truth and justice.

The relationship between religious authority—whether claimed by traditional religious scholars or by “new” religious intellectuals (Roy 1994 [1992])—and the public sphere is therefore profoundly ambiguous and much

more complex than conventional Habermasian theories, in spite of their theoretical sophistication, would make us believe. Even in places where there is a state-sponsored Islamic ideology, as in Pakistan and Iran, individuals, groups, and communities often appropriate this ideology to reinforce their position in public religious debate by claiming Islamic credentials for defining the common good, or furthering particular interests in the guise of shared ones—a device common to public spheres everywhere.

Well before September 2001, the growing number of Muslims in Europe and North America had begun to address questions about national identity, citizenship and multiple loyalties, as in France and Germany. Events since then have further foregrounded the vulnerability of Muslims living in the diaspora. At times this has lead to efforts to organize for more effective participation in the political life of the societies in question, and at times has lead to waves of self-estrangement, exposing the fragility of multicultural discourse. Even in such a predicament, however, a positive outcome of double estrangement with the home and the receiving societies is to encourage engagement with transnational Muslim causes, especially where Muslims are the victims of human rights abuses. Therefore, the fragilities of the diasporic predicament, exacerbated since the events of September 2001 might in the long run reinforce participation in transnational Muslim publics.

In short, there is no singular public Islam, but rather a multiplicity of overlapping forms of practice and discourse that represent the varied historical and political trajectories of Muslim communities and their links and influences with societies elsewhere. The debates in the public sphere about the common good encompass both words and actions. They are also profoundly shaped by new practices, new forms of publication and communication, and new ways of thinking about religious and political authority.

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O ISLÃO PÚBLICO E O BEM COMUM

Este artigo discute a emergência histórica de um sentido de público islâmico em várias sociedades de maioria muçulmana e outras. Estas manifestações de "Islão público" facilitam as discussões sobre a definição do "bem comum", as soluções equitativas para problemas coletivos, a fluidez das fronteiras de inclusão e exclusão e ainda as práticas que encorajam o aparecimento de um Islão "público". Comparando com as noções de espaço público desenvolvidas na teoria social ocidental, este artigo mostra que a esfera pública não é exclusiva das sociedades ocidentais modernas nem de sistemas políticos democráticos. O estudo mostra também como articulações formais e semiformais de "identidade muçulmana" podem facilitar a emergência de formas públicas – e portanto socialmente responsabilizáveis – de Islão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: esfera pública, sociedade civil, responsabilidade social, Islão.

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