

## **Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in the Middle East and Europe**

*John L. Esposito and François Burgat, eds.*

*Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003. 304 pages.*

As the political climate between many western and Muslim nations continues to intensify, the rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations” has reemerged in our news media, governments, and academic institutions. Muslims and non-Muslims, with varying political agendas, insist that Islam is inherently incompatible with modernity, democracy, and the West. Yet the contributors to *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in the Middle East and Europe* demonstrate otherwise as they examine the (re)Islamization of Europe and the Middle East and reveal the ways in which “Islamic political activism” (p. 3), or Islamism, promotes modernization.

In the first of three sections, “Issues and Trends in Global Re-Islamization,” François Burgat describes how the progressive components

of Islamization get hidden under a myriad of misconceptions. The term *Islamist*, he asserts, often serves to essentialize Muslim political activists by depicting them as a homogenous group comprised of Islamic militants. The use of this term also “tends to strengthen the idea that Islamists are the only ones using ... religion for political purposes” (p. 28), though clearly other individuals, institutions, and religious organizations use religion for political ends as well. Due to the essentialized and reductionist uses of the term, the real characteristics of Islamism as a “relative, plural, and reactive” phenomenon are rarely recognized (p. 18). These obscuring lenses blur the image(s) of Islam even more in a country like France, where issues related to religion are often relegated to the “irrational.” In such contexts, Islamist movements are constantly invalidated, though the activists’ reasons for opposition may well be rooted in legitimate political, economic, and social factors.

The obscurants that Burgat details in chapter 1 often cause individuals to view Islamists as anti-modernist and retrogressively reactionary. Yet in chapter 2, “The Modernizing Force of Islam,” Bjorn Olav Utvik argues “that if Islamism is a reaction it is a progressive one, a step forward into something new, not trying to reverse social developments, but rather to adapt religion so that it enables people to cope with the new realities” (p. 60). Utvik links modernization to both urbanization and industrialization and characterizes it as a phenomenon that results in increased individualization, social mobilization, and recognition of state centrality in achieving political ends (p. 43). He then proceeds to draw parallels between the goals of Islamist movements and characteristics of modernization.

In the next chapter, “Islam and Civil Society,” John Esposito further demonstrates Islam’s compatibility with modernization and, more specifically, with democracy. He surveys Tunisia, Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and the Gulf states in an effort to illustrate the importance, functionality, and popularity of their Islamic organizations. Importantly, he asserts that while most of these Islamist movements begin by working within the fold of the governments’ established political processes, “the thwarting of a participatory political process by governments that cancel elections or repress populist Islamic movements fosters radicalization and extremism” (p. 92). Esposito suggests that increasing open competition for political power in these countries and sustaining a reexamination of traditional Islamic rulings regarding pluralism, tolerance, and women’s role in society will result in greater compatibility between Islam and democracy.

The second section, “Re-Islamization in the Public Sphere,” explains how various cultural practices, legal debates, self-practices, and educational

reforms have resulted in modernizing and/or Islamizing reforms. In "Islam and the Common Mortal," Fariba Adelkhah illustrates how the Shi'ah practice of visiting the tombs of saints has encouraged entrepreneurs to open shops near these locations, creating cities around popular tombs and cemeteries in Iran. She also explains how these funeral practices have helped make women more visible in Iranian society. Similarly, in chapter 6, "Women's Islamic Activism," Connie Caroe Christiansen explains how Islam's emphasis on education has empowered women in Morocco. Yet in "Islamization and Education in Egypt," Linda Herrera explains how Islamic education has not been as easy to attain in Egypt. She describes the reforms taking place in Egypt that have tried to keep fundamentalism from infiltrating into the public and private Islamic school systems, undertaking what at times appears to be a "censorship campaign" (p. 174). Finally, in "A Return to the Shar'iah?" Baudouin Dupret describes three case studies in which Egyptian judges have used Islamic law to arrive at legal rulings in civil cases.

In the last section, "Re-Islamization in Europe," Oussama Cherribi, Dilwar Hussain, and Jocelyn Cesari provide an overview of the ways in which Islam is taking root in various European countries. Cherribi and Hussain both discuss the implications that arise from the growth of religious, educational, and political Islamic institutions in Europe. Cherribi focuses on the increasing visibility of Muslims, while Hussain highlights those Islamic organizations that claim to be representative of their Muslim constituents. Cesari's chapter, "Muslim Minorities in Europe" concludes the book by discussing the emergence of a new Muslim identity, one that is paradoxically transnational and individualistic. These authors point out that the (re)Islamization of European and Middle Eastern countries can create challenges for both the Islamist groups and the host countries, where efforts to modernize and Islamize at times conflate, sometimes conflict, and at all times struggle to find a balance.

*Modernizing Islam* makes many important contributions by casting "Islamization" in a positive and modernist light, by reviewing the Islamized landscape of European and Middle Eastern nations, and by outlining challenges that still face Islam as it continues to modernize. Still, many may find that the book fails to seriously scrutinize negative aspects of modernization, particularly since the chapters were written prior to the 9/11 tragedy.

Shaza Khan

Ph.D. Candidate, Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development  
University of Rochester, Rochester, New York