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Islam and Modernity: Reform Movements, Political Islam, and Identity

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Introduction

This book examines how Muslim thinkers, activists, and communities have confronted the challenges and promises of modernity from the nineteenth century to the present. It is a study of reform and revival, of political projects and ethical visions, and of the shifting terrain on which religious authority, social norms, and state power are negotiated. Rather than presuming a single Islamic response to change, we trace multiple, often competing, approaches to colonial rule, state-building, industrial capitalism, and—more recently—globalization and digital transformation. Our aim is to illuminate how historical experiences and intellectual debates continue to shape contemporary Muslim politics and identity.

Modernity is not treated here as a destination to which societies inevitably travel, but as a contested field of ideas, institutions, and technologies. Muslim reformers have engaged this field in diverse ways: some have called for reopening the gates of *ijtihad* to reconcile revelation with scientific inquiry; others have pursued programmatic Islamization of law and politics; still others have emphasized ethical renewal, social justice, or cultural authenticity over state capture. These positions have been forged in conversation with, and sometimes in resistance to, the expansion of European empires, the consolidation of nation-states, and the spread of global markets. Throughout, we underscore that “tradition” is not a static inheritance but a repertoire of authoritative arguments that thinkers mobilize to meet new conditions.

A central thread of the narrative follows how political Islam emerged as mass politics in the twentieth century and then diversified in the face of authoritarianism, pluralist openings, and transnational pressures. Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami offered disciplined organizational models, educational networks, and legal blueprints for Islamic governance. Elsewhere, notably in Iran, revolutionary Shi'i thought reimaged clerical authority and state sovereignty. Alongside these developments, new publics were formed through the press, universities, and later satellite television and the internet—media that diffused ideas, shaped identities, and altered the geographies of religious influence.

Attention to law runs through the chapters that follow. As states codified personal status and criminal statutes, jurists and legislators wrestled with how to translate the plural, interpretive tradition of *fiqh* into national legal codes. Debates over family law and gender roles became focal points for broader struggles about authority, rights, and social change. The rise of Islamic finance likewise exemplified efforts to align modern economic institutions with ethical commitments rooted in scripture and classical jurisprudence. We inhabit these debates historically and comparatively, resisting easy binaries of “secular” versus “religious” or “modern” versus “traditional.”

This study also confronts episodes of violence and war, including anticolonial rebellions, Afghanistan's long conflicts, and the transnational militancy of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. We examine these phenomena within their historical and ideological contexts without allowing them to define Muslim politics as a whole. Equally important are cases of gradual reform, coalition-building, and democratic participation—from Turkey and Tunisia to Indonesia and Malaysia—where actors navigated electoral incentives, constitutional constraints, and shifting public sentiments. The result is a more textured picture of political Islam's trajectories: revolutionary, gradualist, social, and post-Islamist.

Our method is comparative and interdisciplinary. We draw on intellectual history, sociology of religion, legal studies, and political science to map the interplay between ideas, institutions, and global structures. Chapters move across regions—Middle East and North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa—highlighting convergences and divergences in how Muslims have debated authority, built movements, and made claims on the state. We foreground the voices of reformers and their critics, reading treatises, sermons, court records, and party platforms alongside ethnographies and policy documents.

Finally, this book speaks to multiple audiences. For students and general readers, it offers a roadmap to major thinkers, movements, and controversies that animate contemporary Muslim politics. For policymakers and practitioners, it provides historical and conceptual tools to interpret the claims and strategies of Islamic actors without reducing them to security threats or romanticized authenticity. For scholars, it proposes an integrated framework for comparing reform across time and place, attentive to power, discourse, and material conditions. If there is a single argument, it is that Islam and modernity have been co-constituted through continuous negotiation—one that will persist as new technologies, crises, and possibilities reshape the Muslim public sphere.

CHAPTER ONE: Framing Islam and Modernity: Concepts, Debates, and Methods

The terms "Islam" and "modernity" often evoke images of stark contrast, suggesting an inherent tension between tradition and progress, faith and reason, or the sacred and the secular. Yet, such simplistic binaries obscure a far more intricate historical reality. For Muslims across the globe, the encounter with what we now call modernity has been a complex process of negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation, rather than a straightforward embrace or rejection. This chapter lays the groundwork for our comparative exploration by dissecting the core concepts at play, examining the scholarly debates that have shaped our understanding, and outlining the methodological approach that will guide our journey through the intellectual and political landscapes of the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries.

One of the initial challenges in any discussion of "Islam and modernity" is defining the terms themselves. "Islam" is not a monolithic entity but a multifaceted tradition encompassing diverse theological schools, legal systems, mystical paths, and cultural expressions. It is a faith lived by nearly two billion people today, spanning continents and centuries, with practices and interpretations varying significantly across different contexts. Therefore, when we speak of "Islam," we are referring not to an unchanging essence, but to the dynamic ways in which Muslims have understood and enacted their faith in specific historical and social circumstances. The notion of a singular, timeless "Islamic response" to any given challenge, including modernity, is a fallacy we must actively dispel. Instead, we will encounter a rich tapestry of responses, often in vigorous debate with one another.

"Modernity," similarly, is a contested concept. Far from being a universally agreed-upon set of characteristics or a linear path of development, modernity is a historical construct, largely originating in the European Enlightenment, which has subsequently been globalized through various channels, including colonialism, capitalism, and technological diffusion. It typically encompasses notions of rationalization, secularization, industrialization, urbanization, the rise of the nation-state, and an emphasis on individual autonomy and human rights. However, the experience of modernity has rarely been uniform. For many societies outside the Euro-American sphere, modernity arrived hand-in-hand with colonial subjugation, economic exploitation, and cultural displacement, leading to hybrid forms of modernity that defy neat categorization. This book, therefore, treats modernity not as an external force acting upon Islam, but as a complex of ideas, institutions, and technologies that Muslim thinkers and communities have actively engaged with, resisted, and reshaped.

The academic debates surrounding Islam and modernity are as varied as the phenomena they seek to explain. Early scholarship often framed the encounter as a clash of civilizations, positing an inherent incompatibility between Islamic tradition and modern values. This perspective, often influenced by Orientalist assumptions, tended to view Islamic societies as static and resistant to change, only capable of reacting to external modernizing impulses. Such narratives frequently overlooked the vibrant intellectual traditions within Islam and the internal reform movements that predated significant European colonial encounters. Our approach moves beyond this simplistic framework, recognizing the agency of Muslim actors in shaping their own trajectories of change.

Another significant scholarly debate revolves around the concept of "Islamic modernism." This term typically refers to intellectual and political movements emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that sought to reconcile Islamic principles with modern thought and institutions. Figures associated with Islamic modernism often emphasized the compatibility of Islam with science, reason, and progress, advocating for reforms in education, law, and governance. While these movements were undeniably influential, it is crucial to avoid reducing all Muslim engagement with modernity to this single intellectual current. As we will see, a diverse array of responses existed, including revivalist movements that sought to purify Islamic practice, conservative scholars who resisted change, and later, political Islamist movements that aimed to establish Islamic states.

The relationship between secularism and Islam in the context of modernity is another critical area of scholarly inquiry. In many Western discourses, modernity is inextricably linked to secularization, implying a decline in religious belief and the privatization of faith. However, this model does not adequately capture the experiences of many Muslim societies, where religion has often maintained a prominent role in public life, even amidst processes of modernization. Some scholars have argued for the possibility of "Islamic secularism" or "post-secular" approaches that acknowledge the continued salience of religion in modern polities. Our exploration will examine how different Muslim thinkers and movements have grappled with the separation of religious and political authority, and how these debates have shaped various projects of state-building.

Furthermore, the rise of "political Islam" as a significant force in the twentieth century has generated extensive academic discussion. This phenomenon, often characterized by the mobilization of Islamic symbols and institutions for political ends, has been interpreted in various ways: as a reaction against Western dominance, a manifestation of cultural authenticity, a response to socio-economic grievances, or a genuine attempt to implement Islamic principles in governance. This book seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of political Islam, tracing its diverse manifestations across different regions and historical periods, and analyzing its internal debates and

transformations. We will explore how these movements have navigated issues of democracy, human rights, and pluralism, often with contradictory outcomes.

Methodologically, this book adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach. By moving across diverse geographical contexts—from the Middle East and North Africa to South and Southeast Asia, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa—we aim to highlight both the shared challenges faced by Muslim societies and the unique ways in which they have responded. This comparative lens allows us to identify patterns, divergences, and the transnational circulation of ideas and movements. For instance, the impact of European colonialism, though varied in its specific manifestations, presented a common catalyst for reformist thought across different regions. Similarly, the establishment of independent nation-states and their engagement with global economic and political systems created analogous pressures and opportunities for Muslim actors.

Our interdisciplinary framework draws upon intellectual history to trace the evolution of ideas and their protagonists, examining how key thinkers engaged with classical Islamic traditions, Western thought, and the realities of their time. We delve into the sociology of religion to understand the social bases of religious movements, the formation of new religious authorities, and the changing dynamics of religious practice. Legal studies inform our analysis of how Islamic law (Sharia) has been interpreted, codified, and challenged in modern nation-states, particularly concerning issues of family law and individual rights. Political science provides the tools to analyze state-building projects, the rise of political parties, electoral processes, and the dynamics of power and conflict.

A crucial aspect of our method involves foregrounding the voices of Muslim reformers and their critics. This means engaging directly with primary sources: treatises, fatwas, sermons, political manifestos, and court records. By doing so, we aim to move beyond generalizations and to capture the richness and complexity of Muslim intellectual and political discourse. We will analyze how arguments are constructed, how tradition is invoked, and how concepts are reinterpreted to address contemporary concerns. This close reading of texts is complemented by an engagement with ethnographies and policy documents, which provide insights into the lived experiences of Muslims and the practical implications of various reform efforts.

Throughout this exploration, we will maintain a critical stance towards essentialist interpretations of both "Islam" and "modernity." We will avoid reducing either to a static essence or viewing their interaction through predetermined teleological frameworks. Instead, we emphasize the contingent, dynamic, and often contested nature of their relationship. The choices made by Muslim thinkers and activists have been shaped by specific historical circumstances, power dynamics, and local contexts, rather than by an inherent trajectory dictated by either religion or modernity. This nuanced approach allows for a more accurate and empathetic understanding of the

diverse paths taken by Muslim societies in navigating the challenges and opportunities of the modern world. Our journey, therefore, is not about finding a single answer to the question of "Islam and modernity," but rather about illuminating the myriad questions that have been asked, and the diverse answers that have been proposed, over the past two centuries.

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