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Contemporary Muslim Thinkers and Movements

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Introduction

This book is an analytical compass for navigating the thinkers and movements shaping the Islamicate world today. We use “Islamicate” to signal a wide civilizational and cultural sphere informed by Islam yet not reducible to ritual or creed alone: it includes political institutions and social practices, artistic forms and media ecologies, legal reforms and ethical experiments. Across these domains, contemporary Muslim intellectual life is remarkably dynamic—marked by confident assertions of renewal, by searching self-critique, and by debates that are both deeply textual and vividly public.

Our approach is deliberately cross-disciplinary. Theology converses with law; feminist hermeneutics engages political theory; anthropology of piety meets studies of film, hip-hop, and the visual arts. Movements and publics now extend from North and West Africa to the Middle East, Central, South, and Southeast Asia, and across diasporas in Europe and the Americas. Digital platforms and transnational networks have collapsed distances, amplifying fresh voices while also intensifying disputes over authority, authenticity, and expertise. This book maps key figures and formations within that expanded conversation.

By “profiles and critiques,” we mean more than biographical sketches or summaries of big ideas. Each chapter situates selected intellectuals, activists, or reform projects in their social and institutional habitats; outlines their core arguments and interpretive methods; and tracks reception, uptake, and contestation. We examine how arguments travel—through universities and seminaries, parliaments and courts, publishing houses and think tanks, mosques and Sufi lodges, YouTube channels and festival stages. Controversy here is not a detour but a data point: it reveals the stakes of disagreement and the shifting architectures of authority.

Key terms—tradition, reform, orthodoxy, post-Islamism, secularism—carry histories and freighted politics. Rather than presuming uniform meanings, we treat them as contested terrains. Readers will encounter reformists who defend elements of classical jurisprudence, traditionalists who innovate methodologically, feminists who center scriptural authority, and philosophers who critique modernity while deploying its analytic tools. The result is a field that refuses neat binaries and instead demands attention to method, audience, and material context.

The chapters are organized to move from conceptual orientation to thematic arenas where ideas crystallize into institutions and publics. Early chapters clarify why “contemporary” and “Islamicate” matter and how reformist hermeneutics work in practice. Subsequent chapters trace developments in law and constitutionalism, feminist exegesis, and debates over hadith, authority, and moral reasoning. We then

widen the lens to political formations, post-Islamist social change, and competing claims to authenticity among Sufi and Salafi currents. Later chapters follow the flow of ideas into finance and ethics, environmental activism, digital religion, education, aesthetics, science and bioethics, racial justice and migration, interfaith diplomacy, and speculative futures.

This volume is written for multiple publics. Students will find an entry point into a dense literature; journalists will gain analytical scaffolding for reporting beyond headlines; scholars will see adjacent conversations mapped with comparative care. Each chapter foregrounds questions that help readers evaluate impact: What problem is being solved? What interpretive authority is claimed? Which publics are addressed, and by what media? What institutional infrastructures sustain these ideas, and what criticisms—internal and external—test their coherence or equity?

We write with a double commitment: to charitable reading and to rigorous critique. Arguments are presented in their strongest form, yet we ask how they handle pluralism, gender justice, class and race, and the governance challenges of complex societies. We attend to translation—between languages, between scholarly and popular idioms, and between legal, ethical, and aesthetic registers—because translation is where many breakthroughs and misunderstandings occur.

Finally, this is a snapshot of a living, evolving field. New voices will emerge, and old debates will return in unexpected shapes. Our hope is that the map provided here equips readers to recognize patterns, assess claims responsibly, and join the conversation with clarity and humility. If the Islamicate world today is a vast, polyphonic seminar, this book offers a seat at the table—and a guide to the arguments already in progress.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Field: Why "Contemporary" and Why "Islamicate"?

The task of understanding modern Muslim thought can feel like stepping into a bustling bazaar without a map. There are countless voices, divergent opinions, and an overwhelming array of topics. To navigate this richly textured landscape, we must first define our terms. What do we mean by "contemporary," and why do we choose the perhaps less familiar term "Islamicate" over the more common "Islamic"? These seemingly straightforward questions unlock crucial insights into the intellectual terrain we aim to explore.

Let's begin with "contemporary." While it might seem obvious that we're discussing the present day, the precise starting point for "contemporary" intellectual currents in the Muslim world is a matter of considerable academic debate. Some scholars might trace it back to the late 18th century, with the rise of various reform movements responding to the perceived decline of Muslim power and the encroachment of European colonialism. Others might pinpoint the mid-19th century, with figures like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh grappling with modernity and advocating for Islamic resurgence. Still, others might focus on the post-World War II era, marked by decolonization, the rise of nation-states, and the emergence of new political ideologies. Each of these periods offers valid perspectives, highlighting different catalysts for intellectual transformation.

For the purposes of this book, "contemporary" primarily refers to the period from the latter half of the 20th century to the present day. This timeframe allows us to examine the lasting impacts of decolonization, the consolidation of modern nation-states, the rise of globalized communication, and the complex interplay of internal reform efforts and external geopolitical forces. It's a period characterized by rapid social and political changes, the widespread availability of education, and the proliferation of media, all of which have profoundly shaped intellectual discourse. Think of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Bosnian War in the 1990s, the events of 9/11, and the Arab uprisings of 2011—each of these moments, and many others, generated significant intellectual responses and reframed existing debates within Muslim societies.

This era also witnessed the growing phenomenon of Muslim diaspora communities in the West, adding another layer of complexity to the intellectual landscape. These communities have fostered unique forms of Islamic thought, engaging with issues of minority rights, integration, secularism, and pluralism, often in dialogue and sometimes in tension with intellectual currents in Muslim-majority countries. The sheer

diversity of contexts means that what is "contemporary" in Cairo might differ slightly from what is "contemporary" in Jakarta or London, yet overarching themes and interconnected conversations undeniably link these disparate locales. Our focus, therefore, is not on a singular, monolithic "contemporary Islam" but rather on a vibrant, multifaceted intellectual sphere marked by shared concerns and overlapping debates, even if the specific manifestations vary considerably.

Now, to the term "Islamicate." Why use this rather than the more common and seemingly straightforward "Islamic"? The distinction, though subtle, is crucial for the analytical rigor we aim to maintain throughout this book. "Islamic" typically refers to that which directly pertains to the religion of Islam—its theology, rituals, sacred texts, and practices. When we speak of "Islamic art" or "Islamic law," we are often referring to phenomena directly rooted in religious doctrine and injunctions. This term is perfectly valid and appropriate in many contexts, particularly when discussing religious scholarship or devotional practices.

However, the "Islamicate" is a broader and more inclusive concept. Coined by the late historian Marshall Hodgson, it refers to the civilization and cultural sphere historically and currently shaped by Islam, but which is not exclusively religious in nature. It encompasses the entirety of the social and cultural complex associated with Islam, including secular aspects that have been influenced by Islamic civilization. This includes political systems, economic structures, literary traditions, artistic forms, scientific endeavors, and social customs that may not be directly commanded by religious texts but have nevertheless developed within societies where Islam is a dominant cultural force.

To illustrate, consider a work of literature written by a Muslim author in a Muslim-majority country. If that work explores themes of love, loss, or social justice without explicit religious references, it is still part of the "Islamicate" world because it emerges from and contributes to a civilization deeply shaped by Islam. Similarly, a legal system in a Muslim-majority country, even if it incorporates elements of modern secular law alongside Islamic jurisprudence, can be understood as "Islamicate." The term allows us to discuss phenomena that are culturally Muslim without necessarily being religiously prescriptive. It helps us avoid the pitfall of reducing complex societies and their intellectual output solely to their religious dimension.

Take, for example, architecture. A mosque is undeniably "Islamic" architecture. But a palace built by a Muslim ruler, incorporating elements of design and aesthetic principles developed within an Islamic civilization, even if it has no religious function, is "Islamicate." This distinction is not about diminishing the role of religion; rather, it's about acknowledging the expansive reach of a civilizational paradigm. It allows us to analyze the myriad ways in which Islamic norms, values, and aesthetics have permeated various aspects of life, even those that might be considered "secular" in a Western context.

The "Islamicate" world, therefore, is a vast tapestry woven with threads of faith, culture, politics, and social life. It recognizes that Muslim societies are not monolithic, nor are their intellectual products solely confined to religious disciplines. This approach is particularly vital when examining contemporary movements, many of which operate in secular or semi-secular public spheres, engage with modern forms of governance, or express themselves through popular culture. A feminist scholar critiquing patriarchal interpretations of religious texts is engaging in both "Islamic" and "Islamicate" discourse. An artist using traditional calligraphic forms in a contemporary abstract painting is operating within the "Islamicate" aesthetic.

By employing "Islamicate," we open the door to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the intellectual diversity and dynamism within the sphere of Muslim influence. It allows us to examine political thought that might not explicitly invoke theological arguments, economic theories that blend Islamic ethical principles with modern financial models, or artistic expressions that draw inspiration from historical Islamic aesthetics without being strictly devotional. This inclusive framework is essential for appreciating the full spectrum of contemporary Muslim thought, moving beyond simplistic binaries and embracing the richness of its cultural and intellectual output.

The "Islamicate world" is also global. It's not confined to the Middle East or North Africa, but stretches across continents, encompassing vibrant communities in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The interconnectedness of these regions, facilitated by modern communication and travel, means that ideas and intellectual trends often transcend geographical boundaries. A debate originating in Cairo might quickly resonate in Kuala Lumpur, London, or Los Angeles, evolving and adapting to local contexts along the way. This transnational flow of ideas is a defining characteristic of contemporary Islamicate intellectual life.

Furthermore, the "Islamicate" framework helps us understand the historical continuity of a civilization. While the political and geographical boundaries of Muslim empires and states have shifted dramatically over centuries, a recognizable "Islamicate" cultural sphere has persisted, evolving and adapting but maintaining a distinct identity. Contemporary Muslim thinkers, even those who advocate for radical reform, are almost always in dialogue with this rich historical legacy, drawing upon its intellectual traditions, adapting its methodologies, and sometimes challenging its interpretations. The past is never entirely past in the Islamicate world; it continually informs and shapes present intellectual endeavors.

In essence, "contemporary" grounds our analysis in the lived realities and pressing concerns of the recent past and present, while "Islamicate" provides the expansive cultural and civilizational canvas upon which these contemporary intellectual movements unfold. Together, these terms offer a robust conceptual foundation for

exploring the diverse and dynamic landscape of Muslim thought today. They invite us to look beyond conventional categories, to appreciate the interplay of religious doctrine and cultural expression, and to recognize the global reach and historical depth of intellectual currents shaping today's Islamicate world. This conceptual clarity is not merely academic pedantry; it is a necessary first step towards genuinely understanding the profiles and critiques that will populate the subsequent chapters of this book. It ensures that we approach our subject with an open mind, ready to engage with the complexities and contradictions that make this field so intellectually compelling.

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