

Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle over Islam is Reshaping the World

By Shadi Hamid

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A Book Review by

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Shadi Hamid's innovative work was published in 2016 and comes at a time when Muslims are continuing to search for authenticity while fears of Muslims are on the rise in Europe and North America. Playing on the idea of "American Exceptionalism", Hamid offers an important analysis on why Islam and its relationship to politics are "exceptional", and why this continues to have a crucial role in the Middle East.

Hamid begins his work by comparing the theological roots of Christianity and Islam, and by illustrating how the secularization process that took place in the West cannot be mimicked in the Middle East. He continues to analyze the history of reform in the Middle East and its current manifestations. Finally, he proposes a shift of consciousness in the democratic process in the Middle East, which aligns with Alastair McIntyre's theory of virtue ethics: The Middle East's political arena continues to strive for moral consensus.

He argues that Christianity and Islam have different theological "resources" (2016: 45). These resources are non-negotiable tenets that act as the foundation of religion. Christian sources understand the word of God as Christ himself, which means the Gospels are *about* the, not *the* word of God per se. For Muslims, the Qur'an *is* the word of God. This means that the theological development must take different courses. This is even truer for the development of political theology in each tradition. The Qur'an offers important theological resources about government, law, and state, while Christian theology does not offer scriptural resources that challenge the separation of Church and State.

Since the separation of Church and State became so crucial to the modernization of the nation-state, Western societies began to lack genuine moral consensus and thus any notion of virtue ethics became replaced with hyper pluralism and relativism. Meanwhile, theological *resources* of Islam have resisted a similar historical trajectory even under the harshest forces of secularization. There still is a "moral consensus" even if in some cases it remains undefined. Hamid highlights that these theological *resources* are exceptional. He problematizes comparing the theological and political trajectory of Christian thought with the theological and political development of Islamic thought. On the one hand, Islamic Exceptionalism presents a problem for those who are attempting to show how Muslims are just like everyone else in an increasingly

hostile environment in Europe and North America. One just needs to look at attempts to show how Muslims are just like everyone else in memes, Twitter hashtags, and other online media (e.g., BuzzFeed's I'm A Muslim but I'm not . . .).

This attempt to normalize Islam in the United States challenges the theological uniqueness of Islam. However, Hamid argues, these kind of attempts of normalization are detrimental to any political analysis of the role of Islam in Middle East politics. On the other hand, Islamic Exceptionalism seems to confirm the neo-conservative argument that Muslims are different and thus incompatible with so-called "Western values". Both sides are imposing a particularly colonial reading of Islam, which belittles its theological *resources* as highly simplistic. Hamid is proposing a middle path to understand political expressions of Islam by looking at what makes it exceptional. Doing so, according to the author, will help better understand the political climate of the Middle East while appreciating the diversity between religious traditions, particularly within Islamic theological and political thought.

Once Islamic Exceptionalism is established as a foundation to his argument, Hamid develops his argument to show how the theological and political development of Islam is exceptional. The history of reformation within the Christian tradition took a different route than that of Islam. Hamid looks at that difference by investigating 19th century attempts of Islamic reformation. Desires for reform grew out of a critique of autocracy and a proposal of *shura* (consultation). *Shura*, which was traditionally understood within the context of consultation amongst *ulama* (legal scholars), came to be associated with liberation, discussion, and consent during the 19th century, which became equivalent to Western-style democracy. Increasingly during this time, the *ulama* were "either swept away into irrelevance or co-opted by powerful regimes" and "could no longer play its historic role of checking executive authority". In its ideal form the *ulama* traditionally ensured that political power was constrained by sharia. But since autocratic rule increasingly became the norm, reformers began to challenge the place of *ulama* in the modern-nation state. *Ulama* were increasingly being seen as puppets justifying autocratic rule. Reformers, with their eyes on progress, began to challenge the traditional relationship between *ulama* and the political power. *Shura* (or Western-style democracy) became the de-facto alternative to continue on the path of progress.

Reformers saw Islam as inherently flexible and that it could appropriate Western-style ideas as long as it removed cultural and/or immoral excess. Returning the theology, reformers saw the Qur'an as a book for all times with relevant theological *resources*. This meant that there can be such ideas as Islamic Socialism, Islamic Democracy, Islamic Capitalism, and most importantly Islamic Nationalism. Particularly, modern reformists began to experiment with the idea of an Islamic Modern Nation State.

The process of reform led to a new modern foundational definition of Islam, which has not been seen among Christian theologians and thinkers. In the Middle East, Islam started becoming a "political theology of authenticity and resistance". In other words, religion became imbued with religious ideologies. Islam was no longer defined on its own terms but in opposition to something else. Questions of authenticity and resistance can only be pertinent when there is "inauthenticity" and something to "resist". Christendom found secularist ideologies as its resisted force. Within its own political theology, Islam provided enough theological resources to help Muslim reformers use the religion as a source of ideological resistance to Western hegemony and colonialism. This is why Islam is exceptional.

There have been many manifestations of reform by Muslims, and by no means can we say that attempts of reform are new to the 19th century. Hamid particularly situates and

understands reform and “Islamic modernization” to be precise, as “an attempt to rise to the challenges of secularization, European colonialism, and the creeping authoritarianism of the late Ottoman era” (2016: 25). Modern reformist movements differ from traditional *ijtihad* or independent reasoning since the former is political and ideological, while the latter focuses on tenets of Islamic law. Islamic reform is political since they all assume that the modern nation-state can be Islamic and ideological because it attempts to unapologetically “Islamize” Western ideologies, as was seen above. In his work, Hamid uses Tunisia’s Ennahda party, Egyptian Brotherhood, AKP, and ISIL as case studies to highlight key differences and similarities of reformist movements in the 20th and 21st century. One could argue that these four “case studies” chosen by the author to understand the political role of Islam in the modern-nation state is dangerous. To put the Ennahda, Egyptian Brotherhood, and AKP under the same umbrella as ISIS may seem far-reaching, especially considering the first three examples used mostly peaceful and democratic means of civic and political engagement. Hamid, however, is looking at the source of reform and the *desire* to establish an Islamic polity. That one group uses violent means is irrelevant in this context. The *desire* to make Islam great again is the same.

No doubt, Hamid’s work presents problems instead of solutions. He finds that there is a resurgent right-wing ideology across the world since many are searching for a deeper sense of belonging in one’s community. For instance: white nationalists in America are gaining a voice, European anti-immigration movements are on the rise. This search for authenticity is happening across the globe, but is manifested differently in Muslim majority-contexts. This search is not the problem; rather the political manifestation of the search for authenticity and its opposing force must meet in a dialogical space.

The sense of belonging cannot come by replacing Islam with a Western form of Liberalism through reform. Rather there needs to be a recognition that elections and democratic processes are a *means*, not an end. As Hamid points out, Western foreign policy sees the problem with Islamists as their opposition to the modern-nation state. Their problem is the reverse: it is their obsession with it. The engine of social transformation is not the state, it is society.

About the Reviewer

Stephane L. Pressault (M.A. Public Ethics, Saint Paul University, Canada) is currently project coordinator for the Canadian Council of Muslim Women. His M.A. thesis, completed in 2014, titled *Reading Islam in Hospitable Terms*, focuses on Islam in Canada. Since 2014, he has been an active community organizer, speaker, and op-ed writer on various issues such as Islam in the West, violent extremism, and civic engagement.

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