

Book Reviews

Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim Contexts: Perspectives from the Past

Derryl N. Maclean and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed, eds.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. 190 pages.

This book is a welcome addition to the ever-expanding literature on Muslim cosmopolitanism across the Islamic world. Its chief aim is to decenter the long-held notion that cosmopolitanism was a style of thought that emerged primarily from the heart of Europe, beginning with the Greeks, and then carried over into the Enlightenment age of Emmanuel Kant and reached its full manifestation in the present moment (p. 2). Rather, “cosmopolitan instances,” which Kai Kreese deftly describes as “openness to the world (*Weltoffenheit*), experience of the world (*Welterfahrung*), and the skill to deal flexibly with the world (*Weltgewandtheit*)” (p. 33), took root in Muslim societies many centuries ago, particularly during the establishment of the Indian Ocean’s lively maritime Muslim community during the eleventh century.

Chapter 2, by Felicitas Becker, examines the circumstances that led to the conversion of villages along Tanzania’s Swahili coast during the 1920s-30s. She provides evidence showing that Muslim cosmopolitanism was not only an urban phenomenon, but also one that emerged among inland villagers who sought cultural connections with the coast and its wider networks. Mosques in many these villages soon became the nerve centers for both conversion and the building of new ties between people of differing backgrounds.

Chapter 3 delves into Mombasa’s openness to the world, which resulted in the creation of creole communities and plural societies within this Kenyan port city from the sixteenth century onward. Kreese describes his encounters with a host of ethnic and religious groups that had lived harmoniously side-by-side and, over the course of a few hundred years, had developed a cosmopolitan “maritime culture” (p. 44). The Ethiopians, Baluchis, Somalis, Bohras, Swahilis, Gujaratis, and Hadramis were among the communities that helped make Kenya’s Muslim communities so cosmopolitan.

However, the book's chapters are not confined to the Indian Ocean alone or to maritime communities. Chapters 4 and 5 cover the Ottoman Empire's administration of its colonies. Chapter 4, by Thomas Kuehn, analyzes the early twentieth-century management of northern Yemen. A land plagued by protests, the Ottomans were finally forced to devise new strategies to obtain the local Arab leaders' acquiescence. One workable solution was the practice of "colonial cosmopolitanism," which involved a creative blend of the British and Ottoman (i.e., *millet*) systems of governance. The upshot of this was that those local imams who maintained their allegiance to the Ottomans were given greater autonomy and allowed to keep their existing degree of influence in politics and piety.

Ariel Salzman's following chapter on Istanbul and Izmir seems a little out of place, for instead of engaging with the term *cosmopolitanism* and showing how it was grounded in the heart of the Ottoman Empire, she skirts around it. Her essay is, however, rich with references to inter-communal ties in these two cities during the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, thereby showing how the great cultural diversity of Ottoman cities resembled the cosmopolitan cities of western Christendom. Like Felicitas, Salzman directs her vision not only to the elites, but also to the poor and disenfranchised who struggled to accept each other's differences and peculiarities in the empire's ever-changing urban centers.

The next three chapters direct the readers' attention to cosmopolitanism in the realm of cultural and discursive practices. Will Hanley's rather humorous chapter on "cosmopolitan cursing" in late nineteenth-century Alexandria narrates the problems of translations and cultural differences that were bound to emerge among communities that spoke different languages and perceived their realities differently. Colonialism added to this already existing layer of miscommunication and misunderstanding by putting in place laws that seemed to favor certain communities over others. Hanley's chapter demonstrates that while easy communication has been seen as a hallmark of such cosmopolitan cities as Alexandria, the reality was far more complex. Curses of fellow subjects and colonial officials were common. But when translated into the language of colonial courts, they became contentious and sometimes political, thereby calling into question the everyday cosmopolitanism found in French colonies.

From the issue of translation in Alexandria, Nile Green's chapter moves on to "culinary cosmopolitanism" in early nineteenth-century Persia. Green makes the larger point that cosmopolitanism emerged in relaxed settings, such as dining, as can be seen in the case of Britons and Iranians enjoying their respective delicacies. Differences in backgrounds and cultures, according to him,

collapsed in the face of good food, particularly tea. So fascinated were the Persians with the various foods found in Britain that emissaries from Iran went to great lengths to emulate British culinary practices. From this perspective, culinary cosmopolitanism blurred the divide between the colonized and the colonizer, East and West, and the hegemon and the weaker powers.

Chapter 8, by Iftikhar Dadi, explores the paintings of Abdur Rahman Chughtai, a twentieth-century artist in Lahore. Dadi argues that Chughtai's cosmopolitan taste was displayed in his ability to fuse different historical traditions in Islamic painting to produce his own unique art style. Despite being a cosmopolite within Islam, this artist nevertheless remained ambivalent about modernity and modern art. In fact, he sought to resist the influence of modernism in Islamic art by appealing to the ideas of Muhammad Iqbal, among others, and incorporating their ideals into his work.

This book closes with an essay on the issue of *tashabbuh bi al-kuffār* (imitating non-Muslims) by the renowned Islamicist Muhammad Khalid Masud. In his exploration of the religious views of such intellectual luminaries as al-Ghazali and Ibn Taimiyyah, he argues that their pronouncements on this issue were borne out of their specific historical circumstances and thus are neither totalizing nor binding. Indeed, in general terms generations of Muslims have been open to accepting other cultures and practices, as well as incorporating those aspects that did not contradict Islam's main tenets. The seemingly narrow views of scholars were but a fragment of the cosmopolitanism so advocated by Islam.

Given this volume's broad reach and scope, one would have expected to encounter a working definition of Muslim cosmopolitanism from a historical, sociological, and philosophical point of view. And yet such a definition was nowhere to be found – truly a missed opportunity. Moreover, the introductory chapter or perhaps the concluding chapter could have summed up the findings in an integrative analysis and theorization. That said, this fundamental weakness in no way reduces this edited volume's critical importance. Scholars working on the topic of Muslim cosmopolitanism can now recognize the existence of such a proclivity within Muslim societies. Muslim cosmopolitanism as a topic should therefore be broached further in future studies as a way to draw lessons on how to deal with the fractious world in which we are living today and as a lever to challenge present-day claims that Islam is a religion of hate, bigotry, and intolerance.

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