Contemporary Issues in Islam

Asma Afsaruddin
Contents

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction 1
1 Negotiating the shoals of modernity 6
2 Engaging the Sharia: rereading the Qur’an and hadith 25
3 Islam and politics 54
4 Islam, gender and feminist hermeneutics 86
5 War and peacemaking in the Islamic tradition 115
6 American Muslims and the expansion of the umma 141
7 Religious dialogue and interfaith relations 174
   Epilogue: looking to the future 206

Select bibliography 209
Index 217
The impetus for writing this book came from Professor Carole Hillenbrand of the University of Edinburgh who invited me to undertake this project for The New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys series of Edinburgh University Press. My profound thanks to her for affording me this opportunity to reflect at greater length on topics that I have been regularly engaging with in my classes, in some of my research and in my ‘public intellectual’ activities. Additionally, I am grateful to Ellie Bush, Assistant Commissioning Editor at EUP, and to Lel Gillingwater, who provided critical assistance during the manuscript preparation and production phases.

I am most grateful to the following colleagues who took time out of their busy schedules to read portions of my manuscript: Fred Dallmayr, Ziad Elmarsafy, Roxanne Euben, and Nader Hashemi. Their feedback was very valuable. I would also like to thank the students over the years in my ‘Islam and Modernity’ class, both at the University of Notre Dame and at Indiana University, for their stimulating questions and discussions concerning many of the topics that are included in this book.

Gratitude is furthermore owed to the College Arts and Humanities Institute (CAHI) at Indiana University, Bloomington, which offered me a two-course release grant during the academic year 2012–13. This welcome turn of events enabled me to complete a bulk of the research then and start writing. During the following academic year 2013–2014 I was able to make considerable progress in my writing despite a hectic administrative schedule as chair of my department. By summer 2014, I was finally able to complete my manuscript.

During the book’s gestation period and throughout the period of writing I was able to present selections from various chapters in the book to multiple audiences at a number of academic and professional association meetings, including those of the Middle East Studies Association, the International Society for Islamic Legal Studies, the American Academy of Religion, and the Building Bridges group, as well as at public colloquia and workshops sponsored over the years by the Foundation for Sciences and Arts, Istanbul, Turkey; the Prince al-Waleed Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University; the University of Westminster, England; the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, Washington DC; the Maurer School of Law and the Islamic Studies Program at Indiana University; the Woolf Institute and the Cambridge
Interfaith Programme at the University of Cambridge; the Oasis Foundation; the McDonald Agape Foundation at the University of Cambridge; and the Institut für Islamische Studien, University of Vienna. I benefited greatly from my interactions with these audiences, which provided valuable opportunities to rethink and reformulate parts of the book chapters.

At the University of Notre Dame, my undergraduate research assistant Laura Myers helped with an initial compilation of bibliography and source materials. My current graduate research assistant Michael L. Bevers at Indiana University provided valuable assistance in continuing to hunt down articles and books on the various topics included in this work, in checking bibliographic references, and in the preparation of the index. Finally, my family provided encouragement and support all along the way, expressing particular relief that I was finally writing on contemporary and therefore ‘relevant’ topics!

Asma Afsaruddin
Bloomington, Indiana
31 August 2014
This book deals with certain contemporary issues in Islam that are often the focus of both scholarly and general public discussion. It seeks to place these issues within a larger historical context and discuss their contemporary significance. A key premise of this book is that the past can never be severed from the present; a fulsome understanding of the latter has to be firmly anchored in a longue-durée historical vision that deliberately undermines a myopic presentist perspective.

A main focus of this book is therefore upon the historical contextualisation of the evolutions and transformations that have taken place over time in the meanings and applications of certain key concepts and topics that are now very much current in public discourses about Islam and Muslims. Such topics include Sharia, jihad, the caliphate, women’s roles, and the so-called ‘Islamic State’. ‘Islam’ as a religious and sociocultural rubric continues to be essentialised in such public discourses, even sometimes in academic settings, and the Islamic tradition is more often than not presented as static and reified. This also has implications for policy-making in government circles and in fostering a certain kind of world-view that sees the Islamic and Western worlds as the antithesis of one another. By presenting Islamic thought as predictably monolithic and ossified, the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis thus gains more credibility among the general populace, media pundits and many political scientists in the academy. In contrast, the historical, diachronic approach allows the reader to see the evolutionary nature of Islamic thought and the diversity within it, and to appreciate the resources within it for change and renewal.

Chapter One deals with Muslim attempts to negotiate modernity in its secular, Western form(s) and describes the emergence of distinctive Islamic ‘modernism(s)’ as a result of these dialectical encounters. Special attention is paid to the specific historical and political circumstances starting in the nineteenth century, the period of Western colonisation, which created the impetus for modernism in a number of Muslim-majority societies. The thought of key intellectuals, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Muhammad Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman, is discussed in this context and the continuing relevance of their ideas is indicated. This chapter further interrogates whether we can talk about a single phenomenon known as modernity or whether it is more appropriate to talk about ‘multiple modernities’ as plural phenomena inflected by the specific historical and cultural experiences of any given society.
Chapter Two discusses modern and contemporary rereadings of the Sharia based particularly on Qur’anic hermeneutics and explores the classical hierarchical relationship between the Qur’an and hadith. Qur’anic hermeneutics remains the key to formulating recognisably Islamic, and as some would say ‘authentic’, responses to specific issues of modernity, as becomes apparent in a majority of the chapters in this book. Competing theologies and ethical values based on scriptural interpretation undergird the debates between modernists and reformists on the one hand and hard-line or radical Islamists on the other, analysis of which is a critical component of our study of such discourses.

The verification of hadith – statements attributed to the Prophet Muhammad – has been the concern of scholars since the formative period of Islam. This issue has resurfaced in the modern period with a degree of urgency since many of the important legal and theological positions were and are predicated on hadith, some of which appear to contradict the letter and spirit of the Qur’an. The hadith, even ‘sound’ (sahih) hadiths, have thus come under the renewed scrutiny of modernist scholars in particular. Their method of hadith analysis and the responses it has provoked in traditionalist and Islamist circles are discussed in this chapter. What these hermeneutic stratagems developed by a cross section of modern Muslim thinkers augur for the future is briefly touched upon.

Chapter Three deals with the thorny issue of Islam and politics. It may be argued that the rise of political Islam was the most distinctive development of the twentieth century in a number of Muslim-majority countries. The historical factors contributing to this phenomenon – the debilitating effects of European colonialism and the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, among others – are explored and the main characteristics of political Islam are discussed. The chapter presents a spectrum of perspectives on the critical issue of Islam and its relation to politics, starting with the controversial views of ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq on the caliphate in the early twentieth century and the rebuttals of two of his most trenchant critics, progressing to the documentation of views found among more recent scholars and ideologues. The concern with ‘Islam’s’ ability to coexist with ‘democracy’ – the quotation marks emphasise the reified way in which these terms are usually invoked – has grown in significance, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and is therefore a central concern of the chapter. One of the major conclusions that emerges from our discussion is that political, specifically democratic, trends are better explained by sociopolitical and economic variables in culturally specific contexts rather than through ahistorical pronouncements on religious or cultural essences, as unfortunately remains all too common in both scholarly and popular discourses.

One of the most fraught subjects in the contemporary period remains that of women and gendered identities in various Islamic societies, as is evident in Chapter Four. Modernists assert that women’s equal social and legal status, in addition to religious, was a hallmark of early Islamic society, which became
Introduction

Attenuated over time due to changing conceptions of women’s societal roles. Traditionalists and Islamists mostly tend to maintain that legal and social practices towards women that are now regarded as discriminatory are an accurate reflection of early Islamic attitudes and mores. These debates will be delineated in some detail. The rise of ‘Islamic Feminism(s)’ that seeks to retrieve gender-equalitarian interpretations of key verses in the Qur’an through a distinctive feminist hermeneutics will form the bulk of our discussion in this chapter.

Chapter Five deals with the subject of war and peacemaking within the Islamic tradition, not merely as legal concepts, but also as ethical and socio-political concepts. The events of 11 September 2001 have foregrounded the concepts of jihad and martyrdom in relation to militant Islamists in particular and Muslims in general. While militant Islamists promote the military aspect of jihad, traditionalist and modernist Muslims emphasise primarily the non-violent aspects while not necessarily eschewing armed combat in restricted circumstances. Intra-Muslim debates regarding the legitimate purview of jihad and of the means that can be employed to carry out justified violence in defence of some higher ideal are conducted in print, online and in broadcast media all over the world. These intense dialectics are scrutinised particularly to establish their relationship to pre-modern juridical and ethical discussions about what constituted legitimate military jihad. The historical and political circumstances that accompanied these changing discourses over time are a critical part of this chapter.

Chapter Six deals with American Muslims and the expansion of the traditional Muslim community (umma) outside the traditional Islamic heartlands into the West (primarily Europe and North America). The burgeoning Muslim population in the West constitutes one of the most distinctive features of the last century that continues into the current one. The focus of this chapter is mainly on the United States with its diverse Muslim population of between three and six million (depending on the source), with occasional references to Europe for comparative purposes. How the increasing visibility of Muslims in the American public square and their political citizenship are recalibrating the salience of religion in the public sphere and changing the cultural landscape of America are dealt with in this chapter. Furthermore, how this expanding geographical purview of the traditional umma is affecting the self-perception and communal identity of Muslims is explored. The chapter also focuses on the challenges created by a changed historical reality after September 11th and the rise of a virulent strain of Islamophobia that have given rise to distinctive modes of ‘coping’ among American Muslims. Such modes include increased political mobilisation, the formation of advocacy groups, an emphasis on interfaith and intercultural dialogue and activities, and fashioning a distinctive ‘jurisprudence of minorities’ to address unprecedented legal and moral dilemmas confronting Western Muslims.
In an era of increasing globalisation, Muslims, like other groups, are world citizens in addition to being the citizens of individual countries and actors in their local environments. In this enlarged ‘glocal’ context, they interact regularly with people of different faith and cultural backgrounds. Some ideologues warn of increasing tension and escalating irreconcilable differences in world-views as a result of these growing interactions, and suggest that nativists batten down the hatches and attempt to hermetically seal off their cultures from outsiders. Others welcome these increased opportunities for interfaith and intercultural conversations to facilitate better understanding of one another and to make room for the ‘Other’ in their multicultural and religiously plural environments.

Chapter Seven describes a number of these initiatives that have been launched, particularly after September 11th, as the quest for finding common ground between the world religions continues. Given the continued relevance of religious loyalties in the contemporary world, it is easy to agree with Hans Küng when he says, ‘No peace among the nations without peace among the religions’ . The numbers of people currently engaging in such dialogic encounters remain small and they are often viewed with suspicion by members of their own communities and of others. Our account of some of the positive results that have already occurred in the wake of some of these initiatives is cause for optimism and establishes their necessity in our conflict-ridden world.

The book concludes with a brief Epilogue in which I ponder the possible future roles for Islam and Muslims in a rapidly globalising world. It provides the occasion for reflection on what the intellectual, theological, political and historical trends identified in the preceding chapters have to tell us regarding contemporary Muslims and their societies and what they may portend for the future. Such a future trajectory cannot be precisely determined in advance, of course, especially since so much depends on contingent external variables. It is, however, argued that it is the common responsibility of all, Muslim and non-Muslim, to shape this future in positive ways through a dialectical engagement with one another, a process that should prove, one hopes, to be mutually illuminating and transformative.

It bears repeating that throughout these chapters, I have attempted to link the present squarely with the past and to point out continuities and discontinuities whenever relevant. This longer, chronological view allows us to better understand the complexities of many of the issues confronting Muslims today in their variegated circumstances. An emphasis is placed on the use of primary sources to reconstruct a genealogy of the past and to investigate alternate rereadings of texts and of history that would impact our understanding of the present. These discrete essays are meant to stimulate further research and engagement on the part of the reader who is encouraged to understand that ‘Islam’ is constantly being reimagined and negotiated by Muslims as they, like other human beings, grapple with the uncharted waters of modernity. Given the topical and mercu-
rial nature of some of the issues involved, I do not make the claim that the individual chapters provide exhaustive treatments of them or represent the final word on these matters. The expectation is rather that the historical overview and analysis undertaken in each chapter will provoke the reader into questioning endemic ahistorical treatments of these issues and into pursuing these topics further beyond the scope of this book.

A word about some conventions adopted in this book. Unless specifically stated otherwise, all dates are Common Era ones; the double dating system in general has not been adopted here. Arabic words are not fully transliterated; diacritics are used only to indicate the ‘ayn (‘) and the hamza (‘) in less-commonly used Arabic terms. Common words like Sharia, hadith, sunna, jihad, and umma are not italicised nor provided with any diacritics. It is expected that these simplified features will make the text more accessible and less distracting to a non-specialist readership.

Notes

1. ‘Glocalization’ refers to a synthesis of the global and the local; see, for example, Roland Robertson, ‘Globalisation or Glocalisation?’ *Journal of International Communication* 1 (1994): 33–52.