
This is both an important and a useful book. It is important for the light it sheds on the politics and also on the societies of the Islamic world by daring to make an unfashionable but highly productive comparison between Islam and Christendom. It is useful because it addresses very precisely the questions in the minds of many upper-level undergraduates taking courses in Islamic political thought. It should, however, be read by everyone interested in politics in the Islamic world or in international relations, whether as commentator or practitioner, and not just by undergraduates.

One of the avowed aims of the book is to challenge the general Western view of the relationship between Islam and politics. It addresses a general as well as a specialist audience, and goes to some lengths (especially in the earlier chapters) to be accessible to the non-specialist, explaining for example the distinction between the Sunni and the Shi'ah. One may hope that the book reaches the audience it addresses and which needs to read it, both in the West and in the Islamic world.

The book is divided into two sections: first, a survey of classical Islamic political thought and political systems, and second, a survey of the political thought and systems that emerged in the Islamic world in the aftermath of the confrontation with modern European powers. Both sections of the book cover all the essential aspects of these topics with admirable clarity, though one might have hoped for more references to identified representative figures in the first section, a minor deficiency which is absent from the second section of the book.

The most interesting argument in the first section of Professor Brown's book proceeds from the familiar observation that there is no Church in Islam. Brown takes this observation in new directions, and in so doing raises interesting questions about the unrecognized Christian origins of much contemporary political theory. The absence of a Church from Islam — or more precisely, the absence of a hierarchically organized structure to unite the “religious specialists” of Islam — meant that there could be no confrontation between Church and State of the sort that was a constant theme in European history until the twentieth century. In the absence of confrontation between Church and State, there could hardly be a consequent separation between them. The separation of Church and State which is a characteristic of contemporary Western societies, and which is so often taken as a “natural” characteristic of “developed” political systems, seems to be a consequence of a specifically Christian pattern of development, of aspects of Christianity which
have no real equivalent in Islam or in Judaism, and which derive ultimately from the circumstances under which Christianity evolved—as a minority religion subject to non-Christian (Roman) structures of state power. That the hierarchy developed by later Shiʿi Islam is in some ways closer to the Catholic than the Sunnī model may help to explain why the most significant recent confrontation between the ‘ulamāʾ and state occurred in Iran.

Though a formal separation of Church and State could never occur in Islam since it was never needed, Brown argues that a variety of *de facto* divisions did come about, not between State and Church but between State and Society. After the realities of politics in a vast empire terminated the practice of the “golden age” during which religious and political questions were handled seamlessly by the Prophet and then by the Rāshidūn Caliphs, a historic accommodation was reached whereby the society would accept the authority of the state so long as it did not seek to impose its own views as orthodoxy, and the state would not interfere in religious matters (save for occasional efforts to obtain a *fatwā* it needed on one point or another) so long as its authority was not threatened. Importantly for later periods, this accommodation was unspoken, and is never reflected in most works of political theory, which maintained unsullied the ideal of the early ummah.

One important consequence of this accommodation, Brown argues, was the development of low expectations of the state, which Brown calls “political pessimism”, a condition that is found in most of the Islamic world even today. In the pre-modern period, however, the state of affairs that gave rise to political pessimism was far from negative, since one aspect of it was the relative freedom of most parts of Islamic society from the attentions of the state: “The weakness of political ties between rulers and ruled fades before the clear strength of society”. Even under states such as Mamluk Egypt, when “narrowly political history... offers a dismal series of coups and countercoups” the achievements of society, in religion and learning and culture, might still be “impressive” (p. 67).

In the second part of the book, Brown shows how the encounter with an alien civilization that combined the military superiority of the Mongols with a civilization that was not clearly inferior to that of Islam—Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—destroyed this historic accommodation. In the new Islamic world which emerged in the twentieth century, the State had invaded Society, and Society had developed an interest in the political questions that for centuries it had left to a small elite that was regarded as a necessary evil with which it was best not to involve oneself. In the process, the state—or rather a variety of nation states of one kind or another—had both challenged Islam in the name of modernization, and raised a variety of expectations that were entirely unrealistic. The challenges were resented and
the expectations inevitably disappointed, producing a "generalized religio-political malaise" that led to the expansion of "religio-political radicalism" amongst those who had few interests in the continuation of the existing order.

As Brown freely admits, "religio-political radicalism" is in no way the exclusive property of Islamic societies. The difference between Muslim "scripturalists" who want "to bring into existence the divinely ordained society here and now" and their Christian equivalents is that the golden age of the Muslim radical cannot but be the ummah at the time of the Prophet, whereas for the Christian it is more likely to be some form of "New Jerusalem". The other difference between the Muslim and the Christian religio-political radical is four centuries: Brown maintains that the proper comparison to make with contemporary Islam is not contemporary Christianity, but the Europe of the Reformation. This is an argument which Brown makes cogently in a few pages (pp. 136–38), and is a most convincing one. It also has far-reaching consequences for the Western understanding of Islam. Westerners recently horrified and uncomprehending at the prospect of the destruction, on religious grounds, of artistic and cultural heritage in Afghanistan, for example, might usefully be reminded of their own culture’s treatment of images perceived as idols in the Europe of the Reformation.

The book ends with a brief survey of the lives, work and significance of the figures Brown identifies as the Luthers and Calvins of Islam — al-Bannā, Mawdūdi, Quṭb and Khomeini. Brown refuses to pronounce on the likely future of "religio-political radicalism" in the Islamic world, though he notes that the record of states claiming to be Islamic (Iran, Pakistan, Sudan) is such that questions must inevitably be raised about whether they can really claim to represent "the solution". Brown finally observes that there are many alternatives to current approaches in "that historical storehouse of Islamic thought concerning politics" (p. 177), alternatives which one feels Brown and many others would much prefer to those currently on offer, alternatives to which adjectives like "liberal" and "tolerant" might reasonably be applied. Brown’s observation is no more than an afterthought to his book, but is nonetheless of importance, and so this review will end with a response to that afterthought. As Brown so clearly shows, the parts of the "historical storehouse" which are at present most accessible are those which contain the classical political theory that looks back to the golden age and does not reflect the historic accommodation which, for so many centuries, replaced that theory in practice — and did so with remarkable success. The contents of the storehouse that might lead to other alternatives are at present accessible only to those with an understanding of the history of the Islamic world after the Rashidūn Caliphs and before the modern period, and it is precisely this period that is of least interest to most Muslim undergraduate students (a group which
cannot anyhow be said to be greatly devoted to the study of history), at least in Egypt but probably also elsewhere.

Mark Sedgwick

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This slim collection of essays comprising ‘Introduction’ and five chapters explores specific perspectives on the interaction between the Muslim minorities and non-Muslim majorities in such countries as Germany, France and South Africa as well as the interplay between the Kurds and the ideologues of Kemalism in Turkey.

In “Abduh and the Transvaal Fatwa: The Neglected Question”, John Voll re-examines Muhammad ‘Abduh’s well-known and controversial Transvaal (South Africa) fatwā, issued in 1903. His focus is on the context of three questions raised by certain al-Hājj Muṣṭafā. He asked if Muslims could (i) wear European-style hats in Transvaal while conducting their business; (ii) eat the meat of animals slaughtered by Christians without saying bismillāh; and (iii) the Shāfī’i Muslims pray behind Hanafīs without following them in saying bismillāh in regular prayers, and Allāhu Akbar in the two ‘Īd prayers. ‘Abduh answered the first two questions in the affirmative, showing flexibility and accommodation in the context of a pluralistic society in South Africa. In answering the third question, ‘Abduh pointed out that Islam was one religion (dīn) and to create partisanship on grounds of association with one school of law or the other amounted to unbelief (p. 36).

Charles C. Adams analyzed this fatwā as early as 1933. Voll’s focus, however, is on the regional and socio-political context of Transvaal where the migrating Afrikaaners dominated by the Dutch brought Muslims as slaves from South East Asia who followed the Shāfī’i school of law. The British, on the other hand, brought Ḥanafī Muslim workforce from West India when they expanded their commerce and trade to South Africa. The discovery of gold also prompted the movement of people in the region including the Muslims. In Voll’s view, ‘Abduh’s unitary and pan-Islamic response reflected the transition a majority-Muslim country, Egypt, was going through at the turn of the twentieth century.