

Editorial

Introduction: Special Issue on Contemporary Muslim Identity and Thought

Meena Sharify-Funk ^{1,*} and William Rory Dickson ^{2,*}¹ Religion and Culture Department, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5, Canada² Religion and Culture, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9, Canada

* Correspondence: msharifyfunk@wlu.ca (M.S.-F.); w.dickson@uwinnipeg.ca (W.R.D.)

Contemporary Muslim identity and thought include a remarkable diversity of trajectory, orientation, and debate. Among the many possible themes to consider, in this edition of *Religions* we focus on the reshaping of Islamic authority and reclaiming of Muslim identity and practice in the public sphere. The global interconnectedness wrought by traditional and social media, migration, and travel means that contemporary expressions of Islam negotiate not only the vagaries of local and national context, but in many cases also respond to global developments. As such, we find Muslims engaged in various reformulations of tradition that foreground identity and agency in response to the political instability, social change, and sectarian tensions of recent decades leading to diverse formulations of authenticity as well as cosmopolitanism.

Political volatility, revolution, and conflict marked the beginning of the twenty-first century in several Muslim contexts in the Middle East, Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia. In 2010, the Arab Spring was sparked in Tunisia, soon leading to a revolution in Egypt and protests in Libya and Syria that evolved into civil wars. In Syria, the (ongoing) civil war was fed by persistent instability in Iraq following the 2003 American invasion. Political instability, corruption, and repression all helped provide conditions for the rise of diverse extremist movements, ranging from al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria, to Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The most internationally oriented of these movements included al-Qaeda affiliates and offshoots, most notoriously the *Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa'l Sham* or the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Although Salafi-Jihadis represent a very small proportion of the *ummah* or global Muslim community (Maher 2016), ISIS and al-Qaeda used their footholds in this region to carry out or inspire attacks internationally, in places such as France, Egypt, Canada, the US, Denmark, Saudi Arabia, and Libya. This campaign of violence drew corresponding global attention, securitization, and anti-Muslim hostility. Terrorist attacks were used by anti-Muslim activists in disparate national contexts to fuel their growing campaigns to limit Muslim abilities to build mosques, wear clothing associated with Islam, or safely participate in public life. Islamophobia has become entrenched globally, disseminated through social media, think tanks, and government policy (Elfenbein 2021). Dr. Amarnath Amarasingam, Dr. Sanobar Umar, and Shweta Desai explore this phenomenon as it has evolved in the South Asian context in recent years, illustrating how right-wing Hindu nationalists use social media to mobilize fears of 'global jihad' and to target Muslim minorities in India and promote a majoritarian nationalism. Political rhetoric in such contexts can be reduced to a simplistic 'self/other,' 'pro/anti,' or 'good/evil' binary, perpetuating conflict and inhibiting social cohesion across the borders of religious identity.

Muslim authorities in various world regions have responded to political and religious instability and extremism, and global Islamophobia, by formulating and applying a more cosmopolitan, ecumenical theology, to reclaim Islam from the negative associations engendered by extremist movements. Southeast Asia remains one of the world's most populous but generally understudied Muslim regions. The multi-ethnic and religious nature of this



Citation: Sharify-Funk, Meena, and William Rory Dickson. 2022.

Introduction: Special Issue on Contemporary Muslim Identity and Thought. *Religions* 13: 373. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040373>

Received: 8 April 2022

Accepted: 12 April 2022

Published: 18 April 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

region makes it particularly fruitful to look at in terms of inter-communal relations. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, Dr. Chaiwat Satha-Anand highlights Muslim efforts to counter what he calls “restrictive Islam,” a kind of purist theology that reinforces communal boundaries and tends to isolate Muslims from other communities. Although this kind of Islam can enable various kinds of extremism, Satha-Anand describes how instead political realities tend to foster a “negotiated Islam” more reflective of the flexibility found in historical Southeast Asian Islamic traditions.

In many cases, such efforts have led to a reconstitution of Islamic authority and discourse, with the emergence of international networks of self-identified traditionalist Muslims, a phenomenon that Dr. Jason Idriss Sparkes refers to as “Traditional Islam,” with countries such as Morocco attempting to both support and derive legitimacy from this theology. This kind of Islam attempts to revive the classical Sunni synthesis of the four schools of law (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, Hanbali), the two main schools of theology (Ash’ari and Maturidi), and Sufi spirituality as a means to counter contemporary extremism and Islamophobia (Brown 2014). We also see the development of a post-Salafism, discussed by Dr. Besnik Sinani, that softens sectarian tendencies, and distinguishes itself clearly from Salafi-Jihadi movements. As it manifests in Saudi religious discourse, this shift may soon have global implications for Salafism. In the cases of both Traditional Islam and post-Salafism, we find an attempt by contemporary Muslims to reclaim a globally minded, ecumenical Islam by drawing upon classical resources for authenticity and legitimacy.

In addition, the establishment of global Shi’a networks and institutions represents another example of an attempt to reclaim Islam from both rival claimants and detractors. In his work, Dr. Sahir Dewji outlines the Nizari Isma’ili community’s efforts to promote a pluralistic, cosmopolitan Islam under the leadership of Aga Khan IV, particularly through non-denominational organizations such as the Aga Khan Development Network and the Global Centre for Pluralism in Canada. In terms of Muslim practices, and their reclamation in the public sphere, Dr. Natasha Bakht challenges simplistic understandings of the face veil or niqab, foregrounding the voices of Muslim women who wear the niqab in liberal democracies in Europe and North America, where their choices can be reduced to Islamophobic tropes of female oppression and submissiveness. As Dr. Sa’diyya Shaikh notes, “wide-ranging geopolitical dynamics and ideological contestations are played out on the bodies of Muslim women” (Shaikh 2012, p. 4). To transcend ideological binaries, Bakht highlights the way in which the face veil can function as a form of religious agency in contexts that are frequently oppositional to Muslim women’s embodied expression of Islamic practices.

Although it is not possible to represent all regions and cultural matrices relevant to discussions of contemporary Islam and reconstitutions of identity and thought, these articles gesture towards this diversity, in discussing contexts as varied as Canada, Morocco, India, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Similarly, the issues that could be addressed are many, and the articles here simply point to some significant ones Muslims have grappled with in recent years. These include questions of gender and embodied expressions of Islam, debates over Islamic authenticity and authority—particularly in terms of global Salafism and traditionalist responses to Salafi critiques—as well as the global phenomenon of Islamophobia and the challenge of extremist movements. Regardless of the issue, we find Muslims creatively formulating identity and thought in new ways, by responding to fraught global political conditions, media representations, and longstanding debates over Islamic authenticity.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Brown, Jonathan A. C. 2014. Scripture in the modern Muslim world: The Quran and Hadith. In *Islam in the Modern World*. Edited by Jeffrey T. Keeny and Ebrahim Moosa. New York: Routledge, pp. 13–33.
- Elfenbein, Caleb Iyer. 2021. *Fear in Our Hearts: What Islamophobia Tells Us about America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shaikh, Sa'diyya. 2012. *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.