

The Public Sphere and Public Islam

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Public reasoning has had a long tradition in Islamic jurisprudence, both Sunni and Shiah, and has inspired modern Islamic reform since the nineteenth century. Until recently, however, the concept of the public sphere, a key concept in social thought and social science, has been elaborated primarily on the basis of the European and American experiences, and has consequently been criticized for not adequately representing the complexity and nuances of developments elsewhere. By focusing on the role of the public sphere in Muslim majority societies, we developed a project to explore how conceptualizations of the public sphere can be enhanced by encompassing the evolution of non-Western societies in which religion plays an important role.

Secularism and the public sphere

Most conceptions of the public sphere, including that of Habermas, consider secularly oriented rationality to be the normative terrain on which public life flourishes. Therefore, it was critical to explore the different means through which social practices inspired by Islam, including Sufi disciplines and collective rituals, interact and sometimes clash with different forms of secularism as incorporated in the ideologies and practices of most states within Muslim majority societies or where Muslim minorities live. In the various contexts where a public sphere emerges, it is marked by the opening up of circles of reciprocity and mutual obligations. Important factors in this development include how state authority gets legitimized, the emergence of new middle classes that support and challenge this authority, and changes in the social prestige of groups that have traditionally controlled the production of religious knowledge and institutions, including the ulama and the waqf. The approach developed at the summer institute suggested ways to avoid predefining the conditions for the emergence of the public sphere (for example, on the basis of explicit or implicit notions of secularization), and opted instead to focus on various accounts of the practices, discourses, and debates not only of the ulama and their direct challengers, but of a vast spectrum of social actors.

Who speaks for Islam?

Such historically known and contemporary debates thus became our heuristic device. Disputes about what 'good' or 'true' Islam entails, including collective and individual obligations, throw into relief competing claims to speak both for and to the public. Most importantly, these controversies demonstrate that in spite of the authoritarian shell of most states, the public sphere in the Muslim majority world is not monolithic, and its boundaries—if not its topics—are probably more contested than those in Western societies. Novel authorities or speakers emerge in the space between the state and more traditional religious authorities, and thus come to represent alternative points of power.

The summer institute dealt at length with the issue of religious authority, showing how it is connected to the construction and public display of religious identities. For example, the participation of Sufis in public religious debate, as in Syria, combines modern forms of presenting religious arguments with belonging to a hierarchical and personalized religious framework. This is made possible by a textual rhetoric organized around doctrinal arguments partly disconnected from their performative dimensions. Participants cautioned against a simplistic polarization

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between 'official' and 'popular' Islam. Even in places where there is a state-sponsored Islamic ideology, as in Pakistan and Iran, individuals, groups and communities often appropriate this ideology to reinforce their position in public contentions.

Consumption and commodification

One working group explored consumption and commodification as possible 'pathways into the public', but without reifying religion or implying that there are particular Islamic patterns of consumption. Participants also questioned the assumption that consumption

should necessarily be seen as a way of forming and expressing identities or that identities become more flexible and negotiable through consumption and commodification. Religious and cultural identities often restrict and shape religious and consumptive patterns. Among the issues that some participants selected for future co-operative work were entertainment (including some religious events and practices and the popularity of 'religious celebrities'), exclusion and resistance (such as consumer boycotts), the limits of participation (the economic, political, and cultural shaping of aesthetic preferences and sumptuary laws), social and economic networks tied to religious 'nodes' (e.g. hajj-organizing business enterprises), and the cultural and economic politics of religious space. These approaches show the role of consumption and goods in shaping discursive and non-discursive public participation, and resituate the notion of the public firmly in the realm of social practice.

The widening scope of public Islam

It is important for present and future research to incorporate historical and contextual accounts of shifting notions and practices of public life and social exchange, rather than to assume, as has often been the case, that there is a single ideal form of the public sphere for all contexts and times. In other words, the idea of the public is culturally embedded. The way a sense of the public is built into social interactions varies considerably depending on context, and on notions of personality, responsibility, and justice. In the context of the contemporary state, modern techniques of authority, persuasion, and control must be taken into account. The notion of public Islam thus joins several streams of discussion, many of which are included in the edited volume *Public Islam and the Common Good* (Leiden: Brill, in press), based on contributions from the summer institute.

'Public Islam' refers to the highly diverse invocations of Islam as ideas and practices that religious scholars, self-ascribed religious authorities, secular intellectuals, Sufi orders, mothers, students, workers, engineers, consumers, and many others make in civic debate and public life. In this public capacity, Islam plays a considerable role in configuring the politics and social life of large parts of the globe. This role is thus not only a template for ideas and practices but is also a way of envisioning alternative political realities and, increasingly, a way of acting on both global and local stages, thereby reconfiguring the established boundaries of civil and social life.

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