A New Introduction
Sociology of Islam: Social, Political and Economic Transformations in Muslim Societies

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Sociological Imagination and Analysis

Studying religion and society is a complex phenomenon, especially given the great transformations wrought by global capitalism. As Sociologists, we struggle to make sense of the impacts of increased privatization, deregulation of markets, refiguring of civil society, democratization, technological innovations, the spread of and challenges to individual liberties, proliferation of popular culture through mass communications, cultural amalgamation, shifting balances in rural-urban demography, increased participation of women in the global workforce, challenges to our conception of gender and sexuality, and many other social transformations made possible or altered by the spread of global capitalism. All of these changes impact and shape the role of religion and religious ideology in modern social life, redefining our understanding of the sacred and the secular as they function as both social and individualized phenomena. As Jose Casanova argued in Public Religions in the Modern World (1994), religion was once a community-oriented belief system that, aided by global flows, had come to be expressed in more privatized forms of the sacred. But these shifts are nowhere fixed and stable. In 1969, in Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion, Peter Berger, a seminal theorist of sociology of religion, argued that secularization was inevitable in a rapidly globalizing world. However, three decades later, in his The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics (1999), Berger made a different argument that a contra-process of desecularization had risen to address the stresses and challenges of this totalizing globalization and that religion would be resurgent as an important facet of daily social, political and economic life.
Berger’s assumption of global desecularization seems today to be based on a limited understanding of both Muslim societies and American evangelical movements, as just two examples, and tended to overlook the changing character of modern religion from one that is community-oriented with shared public rituals to more individualized interpretations of the sacred, with many possible expressions even within one religion or denomination. We argue that the source of this change is to be found in global market capitalism and, particularly, its expression as neoliberalism; a force that has changed the relationship between the individual and the ideologies of religion and nationalism, and that has altered relationships within families, communities, and economies. From our view, Berger’s original perspective of secularization is more explanatory than his desecularization thesis and is supported by a more nuanced reading of global shift and an understanding of the competing tensions of neoliberalism that transnational theorists like Aihwa Ong call “flexibility” and what Anna Tsing calls “friction.” It is the constant tension between these cultural, economic and political flows that shapes the modern global subject and that sets in motion a self-defining sacrilization of cultural meaning.

One of the most important changes to impact Islam and Muslim societies is the migration of large populations to urban areas, seeking economic opportunities made possible by these neoliberal shifts. These demographic shifts provide for the emergence of new forms of transnational religious networks, ideological communities and political parties, among other social changes. These new forms can be seen in the Gülen Movement, Hamas, the Justice and Development Party of Turkey, Hezbollah, Al-Nahda, and the Muslim Brotherhood, to name only a few such networks. All of these groups must operate and obtain power and influence within overlapping political and economic spheres, defined partly by global capitalist market conditions and the rising power of transnational bureaucracies. A collision between Islam and participation in the marketplace is inevitable, because the rules and regulations of global market conditions are, in many fundamental ways, orthogonal to the strictures of Islam. These interactions are reshaping the role of Islam in modern societies throughout the Muslim diaspora and are everywhere producing secularization as a condition of integration and participation in this global economic and political system. This integration, however, is not preconditioned on the erasure of Muslim identity. Indeed, these very identities are able to access and deploy the features of neoliberalism in forming political and economic movements that seek to advance religious value systems.