



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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These are civic concerns, concerns that relate to individuals as members of society wherever they may live. And they are particularly urgent for Muslim societies because political violence and some of its counter responses threaten to sap the ethical legacy of Muslim civilisations. They also jeopardise the role that this legacy can play in the wider development of a culture of citizenship in which both the rule of law and individual dignity are respected.

Lest there arises a tendency amongst some to dismiss such concerns as being 'too abstract', 'very distant' or 'not really relevant', we would do well to remember that our understanding of, and engagement with, these issues influence our intellectual, social and practical responses to worries that are closer to home. Wherever in the world our 'home' may be, tolerance, pluralism, freedom of speech, and equality between sexes are but a few of the motifs repeated almost daily across newspaper headlines, radio debates and television talk-shows.

1. What are civic concerns?
2. How is 'Civil Society' broadly understood?

Civil Society is broadly understood in two ways. There are those who hold that it is a Western, secular idea, one that is irrelevant to contexts in which religion and tradition interplay with everyday life. There are also those who contend that civil society and key Islamic values have not been and are not incompatible; rather, where there is a search for a modern and democratic citizenship there exist the sparks that can further renew and enrich it.

With a few exceptions, most of the chapters in *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* evolved from papers delivered at a series of seminars under the rubric 'Civil Society in Comparative Muslim Contexts', hosted by The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London from November 2000 to October 2001.

The book, edited by Ayn B. Sajo, challenges both popular and scholarly notions about the Muslim world today.

With contributions by some of the most eminent scholars in the field, including Shirin Akiner (SOAS, University of London), Mohammed Arkoun (the Sorbonne), Aziz Esmail (The Institute of Ismaili Studies), Tair Faradov (International Centre for Social Research), Abdou Filali-Ansary (Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations), Ersin Kalaycio lu (Sabanci University), Iftikhar Malik (Bath Spa University College), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (New York University), Olivier Roy (Centre National pour Recherche Scientifique) and Aryn B. Sajoo (The Institute of Ismaili Studies), the book will appeal to anyone interested in present-day culture, politics and religion, and in the challenges of modernity as they relate to citizenship.

### Structure and Content of the Book

In his *Foreword* to the book, Azim Nanji (The Institute of Ismaili Studies) summarises the approach taken by the above authors as an attempt in avoiding a monolithic presentation of both Islam and its impact on Muslim societies. This is in contrast to the

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tendency in both the popular media and some academic writings to ignore the diversity of Muslim societies and paint instead a highly simplistic picture of Islam. He asserts that some aspects of Muslim society are wrongly “thought to be inhospitable to the building of civic cultures” (p. xi), with a reminder that expressions of extremism in religious traditions are historical tendencies not limited just to Muslims. Rather,

there is abundant evidence of Muslim teaching, thought and experience that has enabled moral guidance and the building of institutions in support of the good society (p. xi).

This sensibility runs deep and across the history of most Muslim civilisations. In this tapestry, ethical tenets are expressed as legal obligations and as personal and social commitments in cultural as well as intellectual life. Nanji goes on to observe that there is an argument that ethics deal with values and, as such, anyone thinking about what is right and wrong or good and bad is, in fact, ethically engaged. When these values are collective or become shared, they provide the best basis for civil society when they are also



Juxtaposed with the idea that Muslims are said to yearn for 'social equilibrium created under the aegis of a just prince' (p. 2), it is but a little step to put forward the idea that in Muslim societies, the charismatic authority of the ruler prevails over the significance of the rule of law.

It is also argued that although Muslim societies in the present context may acquire aspects of Western modernity (such as the political and economic institutions of democracy), this does not detract from the fact that Muslim dreams and aspirations remain different from Western dreams and aspirations as a consequence of their different legacies, be it an 'Islamic collective memory' or a 'post-industrialist society'. Effective citizenship, and hence civil society, is based on individual freedom. To this end, it is also asserted that this freedom in Muslim societies, if not practically elusive, is in principle unsought.

If it is indeed the case that civil society

In terms of faith, history, and socio-economics, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify references to Islam in monolithic terms

is a concept tied to the specific historical development of North Atlantic and West European society, "why," Sajoo asks,

the readiness to acknowledge the prospect of Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak ... Argentine, Brazilian, Chilean, Mexican ... Chinese, Phillipine, South Korean and Vietnamese dreams of institutionalising the legal, economic and political frameworks of civic culture? (p. 3).

He goes on to ask if their collective memories are not as unique as those of the West or why they do

not content themselves with a commitment to civility in public life, drawing on Buddhist, Catholic, Confucian, Orthodox Christian and other civilisational bequests? (p. 3).

Moreover, he even wonders whether indeed these legacies thought of individual freedom in the way Protestant traditions of Northern Europe did, "and if not, how could they dream of modern citizenship and its attendant cluster of political liberties?" (p. 3).

Sajoo takes issue with claims that the uniqueness of the collective memory of Islam or that of the Middle East makes

Muslim values "inherently incompatible with, if not actively inimical to, modern

civil society”, arguing that these claims are “grounded in dubious assumptions”

Aga Khan. Indeed, in an interview with the *Pakistan and Gulf Economist* to mark

...academic enquiry needs to map democratic values, power, wealth and liberty across societies and systems of government if it is to contribute in some way to breaking down barriers of ideology between the developed and the developing world...

(p. 7) both empirically and conceptually. In editing this book, he aims “to spell out both the scale and quality of the plural realities” (p. 8) of Muslim societies, taking examples from the newly emerged republics of ex-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. He also notes that in Western Europe and North America today, the Muslim diaspora

has demographic and intellectual roots that affect the evolving nature of citizenship and civil society within those countries, even as they impact emerging discourses in their ancestral lands (p. 8).

These issues are certainly not limited to Islam or to Muslims. But as Sajoo illustrates, what we learn from these concerns is that it becomes increasingly difficult to justify references to Islam in monolithic terms whether it is in terms of faith, history or socio-economic condition.

This diversity within Islam has often been underlined by His Highness the

the occasion of the Silver Jubilee in March 1983, His Highness the Aga Khan said in part

...there is great diversity within the Muslim populations of the world; they are from different ethnic backgrounds, different languages, different cultural heritage, and so long as all segments of the Islamic world are healthy, lively and creative, that diversity is a source of strength and not weakness.

The purpose of the book, says Sajoo, is not to depict “the full spectrum of civic life in the Muslim public sphere – or rather spheres” (p. 18) but to address some of the intellectual and practical issues that impact upon the prospects of civil society in communities and societies in the Muslim world and beyond. Within a wider context of ideas of law, reason and justice, the legacies of Muslim scripture, thought and practice have great potential as “resources rich in their expressions of social solidarity, pluralism and ethics” (p. 18).

In the next article, *Locating Civil Society in Islamic Contexts*, Mohammed Arkoun observes that

Civil society is one of those modern concepts that is constantly debated in contemporary societies along with democracy, the rule of law, human rights, citizenship, justice and the free market (p. 35).

He cautions against taking specific aspects of Western civic culture and applying them as standards for transitional societies of Muslims. To do so would be to de-link these concepts, “cut [them] off from their existential, cultural, historical and intellectual contexts of emergence, genesis and metamorphosis” (p. 35). This is particularly the case if the actual process of

It is not enough to expect a liberal ethic to emerge automatically as a result of different communities nurturing their own particular traditions

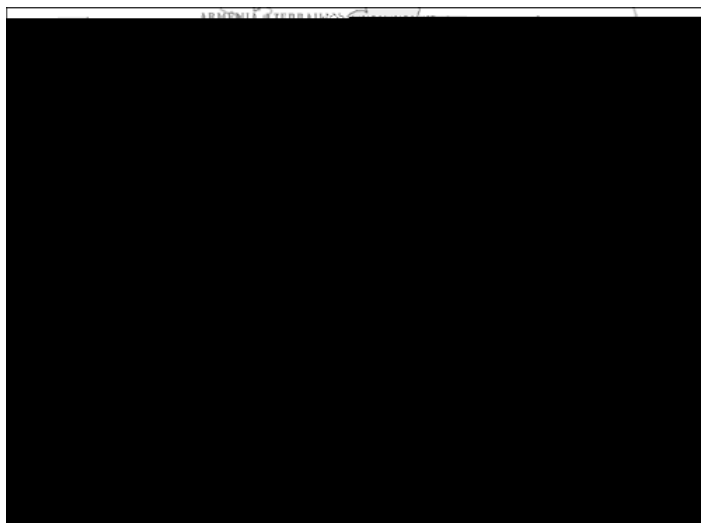




another, opposing concept, evident in questions such as: 'Is Islam compatible with modernity?', and 'Could Islam accommodate democracy?' In addition, this historical experience may go some way toward questioning "some of the prevailing usages of civil society and clarify[ing] our understandings" (p. 297), as Filali-Ansary himself does.

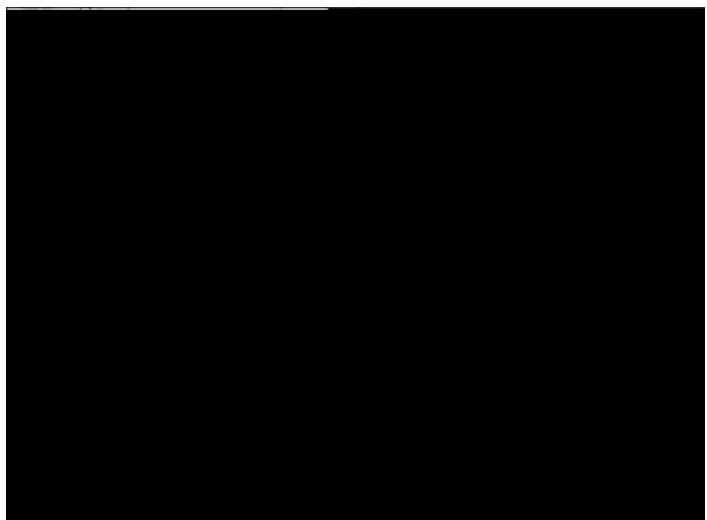
Quick Review  
How does the women's press in Iran serve as a marker of the growth or decline of civil society in the country?

We move on now, from the Maghreb to Iran (Fig. 2). In *Debating Women: Gender and the Public Sphere in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Ziba Mir-Hosseini illustrates how the press, in an environment where democratic choice is limited, substitutes for political parties. The fortunes of the women's press, particularly, is an important measure of the degree of civil society,



cularly because the spheres of the secular (*dunya*), the sacred (*din*) and the state (*dawla*) are thought to be merged, and because of the notion held of the *umma* as a transcendent community.

Liberal discourse on civil society sees this as problematic because it is itself based “on the existence of a pluralist and secular public sphere in which the individual freely associates with others outside the control of the state” (p. 214-5). Sajoo argues that there exists “the need to separate the institutions of state, religion and society, as a shared modern democratic and ethical imperative” (p. 226) for this would practically enable and enrich the civic spirit of Islam. He cautions that





are now being forcibly implemented over a single generation.

The second notion deals with traditional networks of solidarity that enable people to either stand up to the state or to fill in gaps left by its weakness or corruption. The issue here, to put it plainly, "is to determine the extent to which there is a 'traditional society' in Central Asia" (p. 124).

The third notion proposes a 'religious civil society' "in which a community of believers undertake to live according to the values and ethics of their faith (in this case, Islam)" (p. 124). Such a framework, it is asserted, would not only allow the retention of an authentic identity and legitimacy, but would also be able to withstand Western influences. Roy argues that it is really

the second notion, the home-grown networks of solidarity, which will pave the path to the development of a modern civil society.

Indeed, as alluded to by His Highness the Aga Khan in the magazine interview mentioned earlier, Roy, too, asserts that

Building civil society is going to be a more meaningful exercise if it is predicated on the social fabric as it exists and is evolving, rather than on abstract perceptual models derived from elsewhere of what civic culture ought to be (p. 144).

This principle is evident in Tair Faradov's contribution entitled *Religiosity and Civic Culture in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Sociological Perspective*. His key objective was to identify different types of religiosity that relate to civic life in Azerbaijan (Fig. 4) today. Underlying and informing Faradov's survey are the following questions:



What are the principal tendencies and peculiarities in the development of religious processes in post-Soviet Azerbaijan? What specific factors condition the trend in growing religiosity among citizens? How does religion influence the tenor of public and individual life? Is public opinion inclined more toward secular or religious preferences in terms of social organization? Are there conditioning factors that may lead to the politicisation of Islam in the future? (p. 194).

His findings indicate that since



rapid rebound" (p. 249). Kalaycio lu aims to evaluate

state-civil society relations in a cultural environment shaped by a rift between centre and periphery, and a socio-political environment of rapid change, volatility and turbulence (p. 249).

Turkey has undergone waves of democratisation since World War II and Kalaycio lu's analysis illustrates that associational life, the heart of civil society, is established in Turkey and encompasses an array of "social, economic, cultural, recreational and political interests with varying capacities to organise and command political resources" (p. 259). However, active social involvement in these associations is rather limited, with most being greatly influenced by religious, sanguineous, local, regional and economic ties.

The state does not oppose these associations, and in fact, frequently supports them, especially when they are set up in response to public needs. What it has little sympathy or toleration

for, as Kalaycio lu observes, however, are associations advocating "drastic change in the Republican system or the political regime" (p. 260). Examples of these associations include those which agitate for a federal system, claim special rights on the basis of ethnic grouping, or indeed even "women who cover their heads in the *türban* on religious grounds" (p. 260).

The state, though authoritarian, is weak and this hinders the development of civil society, for a "weak state extends its resources and boosts its capacity by ignoring large swathes of civil society, which it is not, in any case, able to regulate and control" (p. 261).

Consequently, only those associations "deemed to be security risks, are seriously monitored, prosecuted or suppressed. The rest are either simply left alone or co-operatively engaged" (p. 261). Nevertheless, as Kalaycio illustrates in the case of traditionalist women's demands for headscarves being articulated in modern human-rights terms, things are changing. Older and narrower networks of soli-

#### Quick Review

Why is that despite the large number of civic organisations in Turkey, active involvement in them remains rather limited?



or can be found in Muslim contexts. Time and again, mention is made of the breadth of the use of the concept, raised as it is in different environments both academic and geographic. As Arkoun points out, one must note these differences while simultaneously seeking out commonalities of meanings. Sajoo reminds us, however, that ultimately,

the idea of a global civil society is only



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**Reflections on Civil Society: Selected extracts from a speech made by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Annual Meeting of The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2003.**



