Book Review: *Lifeworlds of Islam: The Pragmatics of a Religion*

Lifeworlds of Islam: The Pragmatics of a Religion, by Mohammed A. Bamyeh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). 256 pp. £41.99, ISBN-13: 978019 0280567

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How have Muslims historically, and in the present, employed the faith as a practical means by which to foster engaged civic lives, public philosophies, and global networks? This is the main question raised by this book, which examines Islam as a discourse that has served as a guide for a wide range of ideas and movements, not because it has any primordial meaning, nor because it determines human behavior in a specific way; rather, Islam is useful precisely because it lacks such qualities (4).

    In three chapters, Mohammed Bamyeh explores the role of Islam in three spheres of practice: social movements, public philosophy, and global orientation. These spheres are the lifeworlds as everyday methods, the pragmatics that sustain its life across vastly different times and spaces. Why lifeworlds? This is a Habermasian phenomenologist concept, analogous to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus and to his sociological notion of everyday life. For Bamyeh, lifeworlds is a concept that invites us to focus on Muslim experience rather than the systems that result from economic and political techniques of standardization, which seek to obstruct individual agency. The lifeworld is not a purely individual phenomenon—it is intersubjectively accessible and can be communicated. Thus, lifeworlds refers to the range of acts and practices through which old ideas continue to generate voluntarily accepted

meaning, rather than enforced rules by an institution or state. For Bamyeh, faith has enough of a persuasive power on its own so that it becomes a pragmatic compass of meaning in ordinary, transactional life.

The first chapter is about the pragmatic of participation, focusing on Islamic social movements, defined as those who mobilize Islam as a language of social activism. Bamyeh goes through history, focusing on the nineteenth century in the time of colonization, to distinguish between secular nationalist movements and Islamic nationalist ones. The former opposed colonialism, while the latter dealt with deeper malaise, of which the colonial was no more than a symptom. Islamic thinker Malik Bennabi (1905–73), for instance, forged his concept of "coloniability," examining the inner aptitude of some societies to be colonized.

Bamyeh rightly emphasizes the case of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as a very important social movement that combines spiritual enlightenment (sometimes with mystical tendency) and social purpose. For him, the MB has endured since 1928, proving more resilient than any other Islamist movement in the world. At the beginning, with its founder Hassan al-Banna, members were not really interested in political action, but rather in social and educational ones that take gradualism as a paradigm. This movement has left space for its members to choose between different options using a "discerning worldliness" attitude or what Bamyeh calls *participatory ethics*. The basic effect is to create spaces or opportunities for everyday social participation in local, national, or global life, and in ways that are personally felt. Here Bamyeh precisely establishes some comparison with the secular elite, who are often interested in episodic democratic participation. He shows that the Islamic elite carries out everyday participation with the assumption that there are many practical local needs that depend on the support of their Islamic practice—including building neighborhood schools, providing help with housing and marriage, fostering charitable endowment (mutual aid), and participating in outright political (and in some cases militant) activism (23). Yet there is no exceptionalism: for him, Islam as a discourse of these social movements has fed them with ordinary social conservatism and political mobilized religiosity, which is similar to what we have seen in other parts of the world (e.g., Christian social democracy in Europe). His analysis of Islamic social movements is very important because it avoids recourse into a "conspiracy of activism," where it is often heard that "local people are duped into supporting an unrooted movement that has helped them for ulterior motives." Bamyeh is very lucid: "there is simply no evidence to support the conspiratorial–paternalistic theory of Islamic activism in general" (41).

The second chapter, *Islam as public philosophy*, details the development of the emerging modern Islamic political philosophy that seeks to communicate seriously with modern conceptions such as human rights, democracy, and pluralism (e.g., Rachid Ghanoushi in Tunisia, and Tariq Ramadan in Europe), which is very different from the MB's long-running populist motto: "Islam is the solution." He notes that the way Islam has been employed in the discourse of Islamic movements tends to parallel the prevailing character of the larger social environments in which these movements operate. For him, the MB was liberal in its outlook during the times of its founder because it lived in a liberal time, and militarized when it existed under military rules. Anani (2020) would say that Islamic movements are unable to separate the political from the religious *da'waa* (advocacy) when the political space necessary to do so is denied to them by authoritarian states. For Bamyeh, the Arab Spring was the occasion for many new experiments in social movements that took the question of democracy seriously. Again, he rightly insists that Islam becomes democratic, not because it is essentially so, but because it ultimately reveals itself to believers not to be the universal ideology of their own society. The Al-Nahda political party in Tunisia was the last to understand this pluralistic reality and therefore to seek a coalition with secular groups in order to govern. Our work on Tunisian discourse regarding the 2018 debate on gender equality in the inheritance law (Hanafi and Tomeh 2019) confirms Bamyeh's analysis.

This chapter is also organized around two concepts that oppose and complement one another: instrumentalism and hermeneutics. The former tends to be closer to state power and likely to develop in the direction of conservative Islamic social democracy. The latter is generally aligned with "liberalism," but not necessarily as a political ideology. The liberal program is inferred from its theory of knowledge rather than it being enunciated as a systematic and explicit commitment to a political ideology. Bamyeh shows us two intellectual genealogies of instrumental Islam and hermeneutic Islam. The former was started by Jamal al-Dine Afghani, and was then followed by the founders of the MB, and spread to more than seventy countries; while the latter can be seen best through different scholars, including Said Nursi and Fethullah Gulen in Turkey, Muhamad Shariati and Abdolkarim Soroush in Iran, Mahomad Mahmoud Taha in Sudan, and Muhamad Shuhrour in Syria. These scholars have a large following all over the Islamic world, but Nursi's is the only Sufi movement that has spread to over thirty countries (and to a certain extent, Gulen's).

There are many differences in the features of an instrumental versus a hermeneutic approach. The first is more interested in problem-solving and looking for certainty than the latter, which aims to enhance knowledge (rather than certainty) using interpretation. The difference in the source of religious instruction is very important here, and for Bamyeh, the former considers it external (I apply God's law) versus dialectic (I interpret God's intention).

Bamyeh's innovative analysis offers a rigorous, compelling, and rich account of how and why instrumental religious reason can be seen as being analogous to secularism, and, in some important respects, modeled after it. For him, if secularization leads to more tolerance of diversity, then it also leads to "intolerance of religion itself, that is, everyone in society required to abide by some core (liberal) values, regardless of one's religious belief" (92). Bamyeh is clear here that his point is not concerned with whether or not such a standpoint is philosophically defensible. Rather, all social ideologies must define what does not belong to them and leave room for pluralism. Tolerance indeed is a sociological and not simply a philosophical theme, meaning that it cannot be reasoned independently of how we experience these values.

Bamyeh is right that there is nothing particularly exceptional about the role of politicized religion here: a religious perspective serves as a sanctuary of various conceptions of personal or social order. For him, these conceptions may or may not lead to political action, depending on the context. In fact, religious consciousness, modernist orientation, and feelings of national belonging were a closely interconnected triad in the emergence of the modern world. No wonder that the conversion of Hagia Sophia Museum in Istanbul (which was a Christian church) into a mosque by Turkish authorities was applauded in Turkey by almost all of their political parties: Islamic, nationalist, and leftist alike.

The third chapter starts by arguing that Islamic movements and the public philosophy associated with them constitute visible dimensions of the contemporary Islamic experience that operate in relation to a rich, world-scale, historical experience. Here Bamyeh is correct to highlight that the Muslim world is rarely used as an analytical category in the social sciences and humanities. He is not interested in how Islamic heritage is remembered, focusing instead on some main sociological structures of the historical experience. His argument is that the Muslim world has been accepted by its population, no matter their religion, only to the extent that it adhered to three fundamental principles: partial control (in politics), free movement (in social), and heteroglossia (in cultural).

Regarding partial control, unlike European states—particularly during the nineteenth century when they were seen as the ultimate embodiment of organized society—the Islamic state, according to Bamyeh, was historically regarded by its constituents and rulers alike as only one among several sources of legitimate authority in society. Its control was territorially limited to major cities, and this control was to be shared with other kaleidoscopic, local, and translocal authorities, including religious scholars, tribal networks, merchants and professional guilds, Sufi orders, and vast networks of extended families. I would add that the transmission of Islamic knowledge is not hieratical and vertical (as has been practiced by Islamic legal scholars in Islamic centers), but through diverse social classes—particularly traders, the mercantile class, and Sufis.

Islamicate rules are similar to those of the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which affirmed as an elementary proposition that each state would follow its own distinct religion. The only difference being Islamic rule is still determined by its sovereign ruler in the major part of the Islamic ecumene, while the population, argues Bamyeh, does not necessarily follow the Muslim ruler's religion. Religious authority was operated largely in civil society and through the *ulama* class, which were staples of civic life. A famous example is that the two centuries of rule over Egypt by the Ismaili Shi'a Fatimid dynasty (969–1171) did not require their creed to be demographically dominant and this is why Islamic knowledge is not hieratical.

If we understand secularism as a process that has meaning only in its context, Bamyeh is right that Islamic history has de facto separated religion and state, not in the sense of "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God What is God's" but "ignore Caesar until enlightenment comes to him. In the meantime, do your work away from him." Bamyeh's understanding of the notion of secularization of Islamic history is much more accurate than Hallaq's (2012) (who did not see such a process in its history). In this vein, Bamyeh sees that Sharia coexists with political regulations (*siyasa*), with the social realm, and with another source of regulation of autonomous civic life, namely local customary traditions (*Taqlid*, *'urf*, *adab*). He rightly gave the example of Qasim Amin in 1905 calling for the emancipation of women—an argument in which he admitted that he was omitting "heresy," but against tradition and not religion.

It is for a very good reason that Bamyeh criticized those who ask the state to "apply" the Sharia, as this will change the whole purpose of the Sharia from being an art of disciplining the self to a demand for disciplining others

by the state. Here we see the sophistication of Bamyeh as a sociologist, interpreting different polls regarding people's understanding of what is Sharia. For him, often the call for Sharia:

> reflects not a desire to impose any specific law on society than a general will to add ethical substance to governance itself. [. . .] This is evident in the Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2013 in 39 Muslim countries. 70% of Muslims favor making the Sharia into the law of the land, even though further questions showed they were only committed to religiosity as a general guide to ethics, but had no detailed knowledge of the Sharia itself. (157)

This is also in line with a conclusion I reached in my previous work (Hanafi 2019)

Finally, Bamyeh's book is directing his focus not only on Islam but also on sociology. Many of its pages are a convincing critique of the historical sociology of Max Weber and other sociologists. Bamyeh seeks to revisit contemporary globalization debates not regarding how globalization impacts Islam, but on how Islamic global history informs us about the basic structures of globalization processes. If we agree with Bamyeh that global orders are not new networks and have included a variety of models (including imperialism), we would agree with him about his approach to Islam and global order. That is, in humanizing global order we are, in some ways, subscribing basic principles showcased in the historical experience of the Islamic ecumene, even though a modern global order is not Islamic or religious. In this way, "it will have to have autonomies so it appears intimate; it will have to operate as an open space because that is how a system is most systematic; have ethics broadly and voluntarily shared" (201). This is well-organized conviviality, conducive to global commerce and predictability. This is a significant message for the post-Covid-19 world. However, sometimes Bamyeh uses *dar al-Islam* ("Abode of Islam"—a classical Islamic law term denoting regions where Islamic law prevails) to refer to Islamicate civilization. I would be more careful using this term as it has many implications in the way Islamic *fiqh* has regulated this area, and has used it to undermine the very ideas that this book defends (e.g., partial control and flexibility).

Last but not least, Bamyeh announces that the endeavor of his book is to forge a path between two pitfalls: the lure of essentializing Islam, that is, presenting it as a system of beliefs the meanings of which appear independent of human activity; and the lure of getting lost in Islamic apologia, for

example, "Islam is compatible with human rights." In fact, the book has eloquently succeeded in lucid prose. And this success was possible thanks to a culmination of decades of research, fieldwork, and engagement with scholarship written in the West as well as historical and current production in the Arab world, which is something often missed by many Western-based researchers. Everything that enabled Bamyeh to produce this book are the very things that challenge the dominant narratives about Islamists and of Islam, and corrects our understanding of globalization and modernity, inviting us to humanize, rather than wage a harsh criticism against, them as Hallaq (2012) did. This book indeed constitutes a major breakthrough in the sociology of religion.

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