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Islam and Decolonization

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As a trend in twentieth-century world history, decolonization is a major topic in any class dealing with modern Muslim societies. This mundane fact comes as a surprise to some of my students, however, for reasons that I can illustrate by way of a short anecdote.

A couple times a year I lead a three-part seminar (three two-hour seminars over one month) entitled “Islam and Politics” at a local community center, together with a retired ambassador who served in Central Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and South America over a period of nearly half a century. I cover the first two parts while the ambassador finishes the series with a discussion of the past fifty years and current events. One reason I enjoy letting the ambassador conclude the series is that he always (and I think inadvertently) references his experience in two non-Muslim countries, Congo and Ecuador, in the 1960s and 1970s, when trying to explain broader trends in the contemporary Muslim world.

After the first such series, participants were asked to provide anonymous feedback. For the most part, the reception was positive. But several voiced outrage that they had “wasted their money” (even though the seminar was free!) since they had been hoping to find out “what is wrong with Islam” and “why Islam is so violent.” One commenter queried how any seminar on “Islam and Politics” worth its salt could skirt around Israel-Palestine, a conflict “which is essential to understanding Islam.”

Needless to say, these commenters are getting their analytical apparatus for thinking about Islam from media and political circles. The idea that “Islam” is the key to understanding modern Muslim societies, and the behavior of Muslims, is, from my perspective, the most profound legacy of colonial social science visible in our times.

It needs to be pointed out that people who make this assumption are not necessarily, or even usually, animated by hostility toward Islam. (After all, it’s an assumption shared by many Muslims.) When conversation in the classroom turns to the conflicts in Mindanao, southern Thailand, or Kashmir, many of my students complain that their lack of knowledge about Islam prevents them from acquiring a full understanding of political developments involving Muslims.

For these reasons one of my first tasks in the classroom is to explain that the answers don’t always lie in Islam, especially when dealing with Muslim communities in colonial and postcolonial settings. In teaching the history of the contemporary Islamic world to university students, I emphasize the common experience of colonialism, and the shared cleavages, opportunities, and anguish of decolonization, as an explanatory lens for looking at political movements and conflict in Muslim countries.

Breaking down the impact of colonialism on postcolonial contexts can be very challenging, not just for students, but for professors, too. This makes it all too easy to focus on the Muslimness of certain colonized territories, such as Algeria, the Afghan-British Indian frontier, Central Asia, or the Malay Peninsula, as the dominant factor in generating conflict or anti-colonial resistance. In class, my starting point is, therefore, to highlight the building blocks of colonial systems in as generic terms as possible. When students start thinking about colonial organization as the arbitrary imposition of a fairly unitary order upon much of the world, broad assumptions about the colonized (such as the fanaticism, or hostility toward “progress,” allegedly resulting from their adherence to Islam) become much less believable.

The major topics that we discuss in class are what I view as significant commonalities across the colonial political order: ethnic gerrymandering, segregated built environments, ethnographic categorization, and export-driven economies. I try to convey to students the profound societal impact of these policies on colonized societies (including Muslim ones) and the tremendous upheaval involved in attempting to dismantle this colonial system. Although individual Muslim societies have experienced decolonization in particular ways, there is nothing inherently “Islamic” about the process. Here in North Carolina, the smoothness with which one can draw parallels to American internal colonialism (in the form of Jim Crow and Eugenics) makes the case about colonialism’s global commonalities that much easier to make to students.

When I wrap up this general introduction to the nature of colonial rule, I dwell on the fact that our modern predilection with religion as a defining, essential feature of the colonized is itself an artefact of colonial social science, one that was developed first and foremost to distinguish European imperialists from their Asian and African subjects. When we privilege “Islam” as the

driving force in the dynamics of Muslim societies, we are advancing a nineteenth-century framework that was developed explicitly to justify colonial rule.

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