



**Cemil Aydin.- *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 304p.**

It is common place today for pundits, government officials, and journalists to couch discussion of Muslim majority societies in terms of a global “Muslim World”—an analytical term employed by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike evoking a trans-historical geo-political unity among vastly diverse and disparate Muslim majority societies. In *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*, historian Cemil Aydin traces the rise and development of this geopolitical idea, locating its enduring power from the late nineteenth century (when, Aydin demonstrates, it came into being) until today. Rather than locate the persistence of the idea of the “Muslim World” in a “shared history of immutable ideology within Muslim societies,” Aydin brilliantly shows how it was “a function of the civilizational and geopolitical narratives concocted in the encounters of Muslim societies with European empires, reconfigured according to the exigencies of the Cold War” (5). Aydin examines historical developments across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to argue that, despite assertions that Muslims are part of a global political unity, Muslims did not embrace such a notion until the late nineteenth century when a process of “racialization” of Muslims occurred in tandem with increased European imperial hegemony. As Aydin puts it, “the Muslim world arrived with imperial globalization and its concomitant ordering of humanity by race” (3). Over the course of the twentieth century, the ideology of Muslim unity evolved and served disparate political agendas.

At the center of such arguments are two historically inaccurate yet politically expedient assumptions. The first is that the notion of the “Muslim World” derives from the concept of “*ummah*,” an age-old notion associated with the beginnings of Islam, which refers to the de-territorialized Muslim religious community. The second is that until European colonialism and the

ideology of nationalism emerged, Muslims were united. As Aydin carefully demonstrates, these notions do not stand up to scrutiny. Aydin reminds us that clashes between warring Muslim states during the early modern period were often far greater than those between Muslims and Christians. Furthermore, gestures made by Muslim rulers in the name of Muslim solidarity often failed to materialize. For example, although Tipu Sultan, the sultan of Mysore, sought the aid of the Ottomans to oust the British East India Company from his territory in 1798, Ottoman geo-strategic interests at the time –an alliance with Britain against French involvement in Ottoman Egypt– compelled Sultan Selim III to advise Tipu Sultan to make peace with Britain. From the seventh to the early nineteenth century, Muslim political experience “tells a story of multiplicity, contestation, and change, leaving the idea of the Muslim world to emerge later, alongside the later civilizational narrative of the West” (15). Until the mid-nineteenth century, relations between Muslims and Christians cannot be said to have been uniform; in some cases, Muslims ruled Christians as in the Ottoman Empire, and in others, Muslims were ruled by Christians (as in India and Russia). Russian and Indian Muslims did not call for geopolitical unity, nor did Ottoman Christians make similar claims.

The emergence of the idea of the Muslim world occurred during the nineteenth century and crystallized after the 1870s, when geopolitical debate among imperial powers –including the Ottomans– began to center on nationality and race instead of upon imperial strategy. Aydin traces this process in chapters two and three arguing that even as new discourses of pan-Islamic unity were ascendant and could circulate more quickly as a result of advances in communications technologies, Muslim thinkers such as Mirza Asadullah Ghalib and Syed Ahmad Khan, “could weigh the merits of the British and Mughal empires without allowing religious sympathy to dictate their preferences” (37). Indeed, “Indian Muslims imagined their political future under Queen Victoria, and many Balkan Christians accepted the rule of a reformist Muslim sultan in Istanbul” (37). But as the century proceeded, European support for breakaway Christian movements in the Ottoman Balkans and their concomitant conquests in Ottoman domains worked to undermine the imperial system, which in the earlier part of the century had focused on “prioritizing strategic alliances above ethnic and religious solidarity” (38). Ironically, it was European support for Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian independence that is, their claim to serve as protectors of Christian populations in the Ottoman Empire that fueled the flames of pan-Islamist discourse among Muslim intellectuals from across Muslim majority societies. This was especially true during the reign of Abdulhamid II, who promoted the Ottoman state as a spiritual caliphate for Muslims worldwide thereby fusing the imagined Muslim community with Ottoman geo-strategic interests at the

time namely, securing an alliance with Great Britain against Russia. Just as Europeans used Christian solidarity to intervene in Ottoman domestic politics, so too did Abdulhamid attempt to extend Ottoman reach farther afield among Muslim populations in India and elsewhere. Such a strategy made sense given that Great Britain ruled a vast percentage of the world’s Muslim population. Yet as Aydin emphasizes, Abdulhamid’s pan-Islamism was meant to secure *not to undermine* empire. “Sultan Abdulhamid’s promotion of Ottoman spiritual sovereignty, solidified the imagination of a geopolitical Muslim world in the age of high imperialism. “This version of pan-Islamism was no jihad against the European empires. On the contrary, it aimed to guarantee Ottoman sovereignty by leveraging foreign Muslims’ dual loyalty to empire –particularly the Crown– and caliph” (97). Indeed, this is one of Aydin’s most interesting and convincing arguments.

Besides his focus on elite politics and maneuvering, Aydin also traces the numerous and at sometimes, seemingly contradictory trajectories of pan-Islamic thinking among Muslim intellectuals from India to the Ottoman World, Africa, and Asia throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He shows how thinkers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (among others) grappled with an urgent sense of decline within their respective societies embracing the concept of civilizational hierarchy and yet simultaneously rejecting racialized and demeaning European views Islam. In the mid-twentieth century, Arnold Toynbee’s belief that the west was in decline following the devastation of World War II, led Muslim thinkers later known as “Islamists” to embrace his ideas. The language of civilizational decline so popular among Muslim intellectuals in the nineteenth century was thus resurrected thereby offering a radical critique of top-down modernization projects embraced by the likes of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Gamal Abd al-Nasir, and Reza Shah Pahlavi.” For Islamists” writes Aydin, “Toynbee’s world-historical model was a bulwark against Eurocentrism and secular nationalism” (195).

If the idea of the Muslim world had its origins in the complex politics and contradictions of late nineteenth century imperialism, its evolution toward a territorialized and racialized concept was sealed following the collapse of the empire and the demise of the caliphate after World War One and during the interwar period. Aydin explains that “abolition of the caliphate brought to end a half century of global Muslim political thought tied to the model of Ottoman modernism” (130). One of the most important ideas to emerge during this period was the notion that the caliphate should rest in the hands of the Arabs, argues Aydin. During the Cold War, it was this shift away from south Asian to Middle Eastern Arab Muslims that helped to eventually secure Saudi Arabia’s role as putative leader of the Muslim world. Having captured

the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Ibn Saud and his descendants could now make a strong case for their leadership.

The implications of Aydin's work are significant. First, the author shows how the term "Muslim World" has a specific historical trajectory whose emergence as a concept arose in the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century as a result of specific political and ideological contingencies. By arguing for historical contingency, Aydin fundamentally challenges "Clash of Civilizations" arguments, which portray the relationship between the West and Muslim majority societies in terms of perpetual conflict and struggle. Second, Aydin shows how the concept serves specific political interests including those of Islamophobes and Islamists alike, who readily embrace as a given the notion of a territorially grounded and politically unified "Muslim World." Aydin's careful marshaling of examples from over one thousand years of history proves this to be inaccurate. His book not only offers a timely and important discussion of the genesis and evolution of modern politics in Muslim majority societies but also a tremendous and sweeping 'big history' of an idea that has captivated so many. It represents the history of ideas at its best by drawing on source material from across continents and historical time.

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