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Tracing Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit Across Time and Space

To look at Islamicate civilization is to face the choice of where and when to look but it also requires one to invoke fuzzy or *bar-zakh* logic at the outset. There is no great divide between East and West or between Islam and its political-religious rivals, whether in the premodern or the modern world. Many are the historians who have labored to point out that civilizational study is predicated on “gray” not black and white visions of the past, and multiple, local understandings of civilizational actors, events, institutions, and legacies.

In short, cosmopolitan studies, like civilizational studies with which it is allied and on which it must be modeled, requires decentering the West and reappropriating the “rest” for a deeper, truer sense of what is genuinely world history.

In that quest for a revisionist world history—or what one scholar has framed “a world history worthy of the name”¹—Marshall Hodgson occupies a special place. His legacy has to be reviewed to understand how one builds on the edifice he proposed in order to trace the enduring influence of Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit (ICS).

Hodgson begins not with the premodern but with the modern world. He asks of himself the tough question all of us must ask: not what is Western but what is the force of “Western” as a descriptor

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in the numerous theoretical studies on modernity? At the same time, he launches a thorough, all-out attack on Weberian notions of calculative rationalism. He challenges Weberian assumptions in offering a prognosis for transformation on a different calculus than others have made. As a world historian,² the arguments he makes for transformation apply to a broad spectrum of humankind. Religion looms as the catalyst for hopeful change, and for genuine transformation, in the future, but does religion assist or impede the modernization process?

I contest the assumption that only modernization finally works, and that religions must be judged good or bad by how congruent or dissonant they are with forces, structures, and goals of modernization. I prefer to stand this question on its head, suggesting that modernization is neither monolithic nor inevitable. It is not monolithic because it did not impact on all parts of Euro-America with equal success. Nor is it inevitable since it was a concatenation of circumstances rather than any single cluster of ideal traits or the convergence of such traits with technical discoveries, all of which produced what Hodgson termed the Great Western Transmutation.

The Great Western Transmutation overlooked the key forces that had forged all the great civilizations of premodern history: individual initiative and cultural creativity. They remain the twin ideals for Hodgson that caused him to describe the most recent axial shift as the Great Western *Transmutation*. Great Western *Transmutation* invokes Jaspers' notion of axial shift covering not only centuries but millennia of historical variation, while also affirming Weber's insight into the distinctive character of modern European technicalism. But at the same time, Hodgson wanted to acknowledge the social achievements and cultural norms of non-Western societies, highlighting what they had deemed to be both creative and productive. And so, in his major essay on the ambiguous character of modernity, published over 50 years ago (1967), Hodgson drew attention not to Euro-American

global dominance but to the downside of this dominance for the dominated or marginalized. Noting that “gradual diffusions had maintained parity among *Afro-Eurasian citted societies*,” he lamented that “the Western Transmutation, once it got well under way, could neither be paralleled independently nor be borrowed wholesale. Yet it could not, in most cases, be escaped. The millennial parity of social power broke down, with results that were disastrous almost everywhere.”³

The Intervention of Huricihan Islamoğlu

A Turkish socio-economic historian, who herself studied with Hodgson, Huricihan Islamoğlu has offered a brief recapitulation of his legacy that underscores yet again why and how Islamicate civilization matters. In a 2012 essay titled “Islamicate World Histories?” Islamoğlu rehearses then reassesses several approaches to Ottoman historiography before closing with this query: can we write world histories that are genuinely “world histories”?

Our present history at least suggests that it is time to look beyond Western domination. A genuine rethinking of world history implies transcending the binaries of West and non-West, European center and non-European periphery, premodern and modern. It implies questioning the identification of modernity with the West, whereby institutions emerging from Western history represented universal attributes of modernity, merely imported or adopted or resisted by non-Westerners [...]

Decades ago, Marshall Hodgson remarked that without the rich cumulation of institutional innovations in the Afro-Eurasian *oikoumene* – including those in the Islamicate lands of the Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid empires – the Western transmutation would have been “unthinkable.” That transmutation was itself part of world historical processes, representing mostly an acceleration of these processes in the late eighteenth century, in such a way as to result in Western world domination.

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And the problem that this acceleration and dominance pose for global comity is the same for her as for Hodgson. What was lost was a differential view of human progress.

For Hodgson this [pre-eighteenth century] concerted effort to respond to changing conditions through institutional innovation – to find new ways of ordering production, property rights, commercial transactions, and state administration – represented the “unity of history.” That view of unity implied that different regions shaped and contributed to the core content of history. Hence, it is important to ask, *how* did different societies meet the challenge of modern transformation, what institutional solutions did they produce? Crucially, *all* the regions throughout Eurasia have been involved in the historical processes of modern transformation.⁴

Subsequently Islamoğlu elaborated on her expansive view of global change by adding an accent on the metaphysical underpinning, the core moral imperative, that suffuses *The Venture of Islam*. At WOC-MES 2014 in Ankara, she observed that:

Central to Hodgson’s work was a sense of the moral significance of the history one wrote. Above all, Islam’s ongoing venture has been the sisyphus-like struggle of its elites seeking institutionally innovative solutions to meet multiple historical challenges. This pursuit of a moral life, at once individual and collective, continued in larger polities of empires amidst unpredictabilities and chaos following the Mongol invasions. The cast of elites expanded. It extended to include bureaucrats, warriors, merchants, industrialists. At the same time the moral concern for a just societal order focused on ideas of government and statecraft that developed in Islamicate societies but exceeded the borders of Muslim majority empires. They were shared and transmuted to become part of larger streams of world history.⁵

And so, the Hodgsonian legacy—an open-ended vision of history, committed to justice—remains vital, not least because civilization, Islamicate civilization, demands fresh rethinking in the

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contemporary era. It has to be reclaimed for those who advocate an ICS in their time and for like-minded moral visionaries. If Hodgson was a product of the Cold War, fighting the demons of Western exceptionalism and anti-Communism, we are today products of a new age of connectivity and global imaginaries, marked unequally by networks of solidarity and resistance. Where are equality and justice, not just as empty slogans but as institutional markers of collective hope?

Above all, it is the geography of an ICS that offers new horizons. The expanse of Islamicate societies extends to the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia but also to Euro-America and Africa. Those of us who study Islam must identify and herald the new elites who challenge us with a fresh moral vision, an Islamicate cosmopolitan ethos that seeks to replace the current world (dis)order with a sustainable, and just, new order. These are the latest generation of ICS exemplars. Let us mark Huricihan Islamoğlu and Riverbend at the forefront. Nor is it a mere accident that two leading ICS advocates should be women, since Hodgson himself was an advocate for gender as well as social justice, far in advance of his time.⁶

There are three crucial elements from Hodgson and Islamoğlu that need to be stressed: elites, empires, and modernity. Each has its own valence; none can be ignored in tracing ICS over time and space.

First, lives of elites matter. The Sisyphus-like struggle of Muslim elites—bureaucrats, warriors, merchants, industrialists, and scholars—was to seek solutions to multiple historical challenges. Nonelites also matter but elites dominate the civilizational kaleidoscope etched over time and space, and they are the primary class to consider as exemplars of ICS, Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit.

Second, empires matter. Elites' pursuit of a moral life continued in empires before and after the Mongol invasions. New ideas of statecraft developed in Islamicate societies. They exceeded the borders of Muslim majority empires, becoming part of larger streams of world history, and so it is impossible to calculate who embodied ICS without reference to the institutions and practices, the norms and values that marked these empires.

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Third, modernity matters—everywhere. The Great Western Transmutation shadowed the open-ended vision of history, with an accent on justice, that Hodgson evoked vividly and repeatedly. In volume three of *The Venture of Islam*, he seems to argue that Islamicate societies persist even if Islamicate civilization vanishes. One must review that judgment on the peripheries, especially the West African and Southeast Asian peripheries, of the extant Afro-Eurasian ecumene, but it is first necessary to estimate the emergence of Islam, and so an Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit, on the two wings of empire: India and Andalusia.

Notes

- 1 See below, Huricihan Islamoğlu, “Islamicate World Histories?” in Douglas Northrup, ed., *A Companion to World History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): chapter 30, 447–463. She begins the final section (457–460) with the further query: “Can We Write World Histories that are Genuinely World Histories?”
- 2 Edmund Burke III observed that Hodgson had an unpublished book-length work, “The Unity of World History,” which remains unpublished, though the last three chapters of that liminal work were published as Part III of Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History* (Studies in Comparative World History) (E. Burke, ed.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): xi and 247–299. Edmund Burke III and Robert Mankin, eds., *Islam and World History: The Ventures of Marshall Hodgson* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), dedicates Part One to “Hodgson and World History.” It consists of four essays, by Michael Geyer, Katja Naumann, C.A. Bayly, and Pamela Crossley. Along with other revisionist historians, I am indebted to Burke for his decades-long dedication to popularizing and expanding the legacy of Hodgson as a world historian.
- 3 Burke/Hodgson (1993): 70–71. While Hodgson did not know Enrique Dussel, it is impossible to imagine that he would not have agreed with Dussel’s insight that European modernity is itself

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ambiguous, bifurcated rather than unified in its role as a modern colonial project. A leading Mexican philosopher and world historian, Enrique Dussel depicts not one but two major forms of modernity. Hispanic modernity or Modernity I was centered in Seville. It projected a mercantilist and monetary expansion of Portuguese—but even more, Spanish—influence that included missionary projects on behalf of the Roman Church from Latin America to East Asia. It was succeeded in the mid-17th century by Modernity II, centered first in Amsterdam but then recentered from the 18th century on in England and Scotland. It was mercantilist and bourgeois, advocating Christianity as in Modernity I, but sending Protestant rather than Catholic missionaries to the marginalized, colonized world. Major regions, but also all the major religions, were affected by this two-pronged emergence of European Modernity, none more so than Islam and the Muslim societies of Asia and Africa, or what Hodgson calls the Afro-Eurasian ecumene. See Enrique Dussel, “The Sociohistorical Meaning of Liberation Theology (Reflections about Its Origin and World Context)” in David N. Hopkins, Lois Ann Lorentzen, Eduardo Mendieta, and David Batstone, eds., *Religions/Globalizations—Theories and Cases* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2001): 34–35.

- 4 Huricihan Islamoğlu, “Islamicate World Histories” in Douglas Northrup, ed., *A Companion to World History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012): chapter 30, 447–463, here summarized to fit my argument for Islamicate cosmopolitan as a pervasive element of world history.
- 5 The complete text of Islamoğlu’s (2014) WOCMES paper can be found at: https://www.academia.edu/37842112/ISLAMOGLU_Marshall_Hodgson_and_WorldHistoryas_Fulfillment_of_Individual_Moral_Responsibility.pdf (accessed June 24, 2020).
- 6 Jocelyne Dakhliya, “Harems and Cathedrals: The Question of Gender and Sexuality in the Work of Marshall Hodgson” in Burke and Mankin (2018): chapter 8. Also noteworthy is that the most accessible summary digest of *The Venture of Islam* was provided by Hodgson’s last PhD student, herself a brilliant female comparativist. See “The Islamic World,” an epitome by Marilyn Waldman, along with Malika Zeghal, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online (accessed on May 30, 2020).