

Title—The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History

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Categories: Islam, Intellectual History, Religion, Colonialism

Place: The World

Time: 1700-2000

Argument Synopsis:

Throughout modern history, Muslims and non-Muslims alike have appealed to an imagined global Muslim community. Aydin is interested in problematizing the concept of a ‘Muslim world’ through demonstrating the origin and understanding the appeal of dominant narratives where the Muslim world lives alongside the Christian West. She argues that the Muslim world is not an innate concept deriving from the ummah, but rather that the ‘Muslim world’ appeared alongside imperial globalization. She claims: “the racialization of Islam was bound up with its transformation into a universal and uniform religious tradition, a force in international politics, and a distinct object in a discourse of civilizations.” (3) Aydin argues that the notion of the Muslim world was a centerpiece of imperial propaganda during the Second World War but receded at the peak of decolonization due to a lack of a clear successor for the Ottoman Empire.

Aydin strives to deconstruct the notion of the Muslim world, and to demonstrate its illusory nature and the ways it has been utilized and weaponized in the past few centuries. The Elaboration of Muslim difference and Muslim unity, the backbone of the notion of the Muslim world, leads to work that emphasizes Muslim exceptionalism—a theory that is unsupported and unsubstantiated. Her study is focused on the period from the mid eighteenth century through the present, but she does briefly discuss early Muslim political life in order to demonstrate that the notion of a caliphate cannot sustain contemporary claims of Muslim unity. Aydin argues that Muslim reformers in the mid to late nineteenth century attempted to position Islam as enlightened and tolerant, and this served to produce the notion of Islam in the abstract. These beliefs informed the Orientalist conception in the West of Muslims as essentially different from the rest of humanity.

Aydin identifies a high point in the use of the ‘Muslim world’ during the interwar period, when the Ottoman Empire was struggling and soon to draw its final breath. The period from 1918 to 1924 saw the peak of pan-Islamic mobilization in the name of saving and empowering the Muslim world. However, the end of this period brought with it the fall of an imagined global Muslim solidarity as the Ottoman Empire dissolved. The idea of the Muslim world would not return to this level of power until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Conflicts across the Middle East beginning in the late 1980s buttressed the claims of a ‘clash of civilizations’ between Islam and the West. Although today Muslim societies are more divided than ever, the reference to an idealized Muslim unity still persists—this narrative does the work of racializing Muslims especially in Europe and the United States. Aydin illuminates how contemporary discourse of the Muslim world and the West ignores the political context of empire in which these categories were initially established. This informs her argument that the notion of the Muslim world is itself secular, and relies on cultural and political cues as opposed to religious.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The idea of a Muslim world arrived with imperial globalization and its concomitant ordering of humanity by race
- Persistence of this idea is a function of the narratives created in encounters of Muslim societies with European empires; concepts are inseparable from their colonial context
- Idea of Muslim world serves to racialize Muslims, especially in Europe and the US