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The Challenge of Religious Minorities to Secular Polities in Africa and Asia, with special reference to Egypt and Ethiopia, Indonesia and the Philippines

Bruce B. Lawrence, Duke University

Overview

Since 9/11 multi-confessional nationalism, once a weathervane of social comity, seems at risk throughout Africa and Asia, in Muslim-Christian states as well as in Christian-Muslim states. Among unnoted victims of the ‘war on terror’ are indigenous minorities, not recent refugees or stateless migrants but groups who for centuries have been the standard bearers of deep pluralism within several African and Asian nation-states.

Four groups stand out as test cases of this silent yet ominous process of attrition: Copts and Kristens, Hararis and ‘Moros’. Straddling Africa and the Middle East, Egypt is home to a large Coptic community which, along with a handful of Protestants and Catholics, strives to maintain a Christian loyalty within the largest Sunni polity of the Arab/Muslim world. On the other side of the Indian Ocean, it is Indonesia where Protestants and Catholics, officially recognized as separate religions but collectively recognized in Bahasa as Kristens, try to project a Christian presence in the world’s largest Muslim country. Equally at risk are Muslim minorities within majority Christian states. Two of these states are adjacent to Egypt and to Indonesia. South of Egypt it is Muslims from Harar, or Hararis, who not only produce coffee but also struggle within Orthodox Ethiopia, while

north of Indonesia, in what is sometimes called the Phil-Indo Archipelago, the Moros have become a beleaguered Muslim minority in Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippines.

Each of these countries – Egypt and Ethiopia, Indonesia and the Philippines - has its own history and its own trajectory, yet together they reflect patterns of portentous change beyond their national or regional context. On a global plane one cannot assess the future of Muslim-Christian relations unless, or until, one confronts both minority fears and majority paranoia in the real life experience of Christians with Muslims in Egypt and Indonesia, Muslims with Christians in Ethiopia and the Philippines.

The difficulty is to peel back the layers of misunderstanding that challenge an accurate assessment of real life experience, and preclude a strategy for reversing, or at least halting, the sense of attrition that pervades all these minority communities. One of the foremost problems is religion itself, or rather ideology masked as religion, where ideologues claim religion as the sole explanation for a range of issues that have little or nothing to do with religious beliefs or practices. In studying four minority communities, with complex interconnections to each other as also to the larger religious bodies they represent, I want to argue that one must begin with religion but not end with religion. Of equal concern and value is the secular. The secular has been neglected as a resource in weaving tapestries and building bridges between Christians and Muslims. In Egypt and Indonesia, as also in Harar and Mindanao, the secular often mediates as well as moderates the religious, so much so that the progress, or failure, of pluralism can only be charted in the messiness of living history, nowhere more visibly than in the daily experience of Christian and Muslim minorities. Don Emmerson, an expert on Indonesian politics, has argued

that scholars need to investigate what is secular about Islam – or Christianity, particularly when one seeks to contextualize religious justifications for pluralism, democracy and citizenship (see Friend 2006: 93-96).

Emerson's observations are reinforced by two major theorists of secularism, William Connolly and Talal Asad. Connolly has argued that deep pluralism has a double face - asserting one's own religious identity as valid while acknowledging the right of others to assert theirs. Only deep pluralism, in Connolly's view, can foster a robust civil society (Connolly 2003). Yet insofar as pluralism requires an historical contextualization, notes Asad, one must first examine the source for moral authority in liberal democracies; it derives not from religion but from the guiding hand of the secular, to wit, specific precedents for secular conceptions of both the state and religion (Asad 2003).

Religious minorities challenge not only theorists but also policy makers to rethink the character and conduct of the nation-state. Three requirements for the Western model of the nation-state, according to a leading cultural historian, are: a secular state, a pluralistic nation and minimalist religion (Lincoln 2003:76). Yet since the end of the Cold War, religious identity has supplanted ideological loyalty as the mark of both individual and collective national discourse. While new waves of immigrant Muslims to Europe and America have commanded media attention for their resistance to Western norms of collective identity, little attention has been directed to indigenous religious minorities – Christian and Muslim – many of them centuries old that dot the maps of Africa and Asia.

Though seldom prominent in policy reflection, indigenous minorities, Copts in Egypt as also Kristens in Indonesia, continue to play a crucial role

in secular politics. Many of their leaders feel that secularism has not delivered on its promises of a better day, failing to guarantee either freedom of worship, protection from conversion, or sharing of resources within majority Muslim polities. In short, they experience attrition due to their minority religious identity. Identity issues that affect these religious minorities also spill over beyond national borders. Problems similar to those confronting Copts in Egypt and Kristens in Indonesia confront Muslim minorities in Ethiopia and the Philippines. The same hierarchy of values and asymmetry of resource distribution that restricts the Coptic minority of Egypt, also impacts the Muslim minority in Harar, while in the Phil-Indo Archipelago, colonial aggression, followed by contemporary neglect, still hamper the Moros of Mindanao (Majul 1985:17-23 & Amoroso 2003:118-47).

Crucial Questions That Will Not Go Away

There can be little prospect of an ideological détente, a way beyond the clash or crash of civilizations, unless one accounts for religious minorities. Religious minorities are doubly marginalized, visually by creedal/ritual markings that separate them from the majority and bureaucratically by the nation-state that must project, as well as defend, the interests of the majority. Crucial questions to address are: 1) Have religious minorities become a crucial index to the success, or failure, of deep pluralism and social comity? 2) How does one construct a nuanced profile of religiously validated conflict involving Muslims and Christians, but also its inverse, cooperation and accommodation? 3) What secular mechanisms facilitate cooperation rather than conflict between religiously defined minorities and their compatriots? & 4) How does location, whether

in Africa or Asia, provide not just different narratives but also diverse outcomes for minority religious communities?

Muslim majorities engage their Christian compatriots, and vice versa. Pivotal to their relationship is the role of the state in both mediating and moderating religious competition. I want to argue that trans-national networks of solidarity, particularly since the end of the Cold War, and now with the advent of new technologies, have altered the nature of Christian-Muslim relations. Network theory must elide with historical analysis, if we are to answer one central query: how can regional, national and trans-national leaders, whether representing civil society or political parties, accommodate the concerns, and placate the fears, of Muslim and Christian minorities, without making these same minorities susceptible to radicalization given the bureaucratic strictures and opportunity denials that many believe restrict them within the secular nation-state?

In tracing the regional and national histories of Muslim-Christian encounters, one must begin by locating Muslim-Christian interaction within specific, nation-state contexts. Neither Islam nor Christianity is a monolithic bloc. Both have a public presence in Afro-Asian secular states, two with sizable Christian minorities, another two with sizable Muslim minorities. Richard Bulliett has highlighted Indonesia, and above all, its educational institutions, as the pragmatic corrective to Samuel Huntington's woolly 'clash of civilizations' (Bulliett 2004), and in all four contexts I noted above – Egypt and Ethiopia, Indonesia and the Philippines - national educational policy plays a pivotal, if often problematic, role. Do rival truth-claims matter? Yes, but mostly in private exchanges. Do alternative rituals prompt conflict? Yes, but only when they challenge a 'neutral' public space. More crucial than either rival truth-claims or variant

rituals are educational agendas, social structures and political decisions, all subject to contestation and change.

Numerous are the questions touching the actual experience that occurs in public space shared by Muslims and Christians. These questions may be sorted out into queries, some specific to each country, others overlapping and common to both. In Indonesia, for instance, how does Muslim family law affect inter-religious marriages? How persuasive and influential are Muslim constitutional theologies on democracy and human rights? Do they have Kristen counterparts? In Egypt, do family law debates touch both communities as they do in Indonesia? To the extent that they are channeled through civil networks, do they foreground the power asymmetry between the Coptic Church and al-Azhar, the leading authority for Muslim norms and values? And what of secondary groups: how have secondary groups, like Evangelical Christians or the Brotherhood and Tablighi Jamaat, complicated Sunni-Coptic relations, and are they more influential than their counterparts in Indonesia?

Especially crucial is the role of education: has the pluralist structure of higher education in Indonesia perhaps diminished the power of exclusivist religious groups, or do the latter retain a footprint in civil society that undercuts the government's avowedly inclusive goals? And finally, do the Muslim minorities in Harar and Mindanao have sufficient social resources to build "islands of civility" (Kaldor 2007:146-7), that is, self-sustaining zones of civility with basic services and local production, that allow for a workable strategy of peace with their Christian compatriots?

And what of the Internet?! Since the deepest context for minorities – both Muslim and Christian – is their embeddedness in secular nation-state that are also impacted by the Information Age, one must revisit, and also

revise, some of the assumptions made about Islam and secularism by taking into account Muslim presence in cyberspace.

Muslim Networks and the Challenge of Cyberspace

Consider how Talal Asad, cited above, proposes to move beyond the religious-secular tension in the educational strategies and knowledge production of majority Muslim societies. Muslim by birth and secularist by conviction, Asad argues that the usual concern about refuting or displacing secularism is misplaced. In his view, there is an underlying tension, bordering on a basic contradiction, between religious and secular as exclusive mindsets. Modern secular ideologies may claim to replace religious impulses, agendas and outcomes, but they actually echo these same impulses, parrot their agendas and seek similar outcomes. Functionally secular and religious are inseparable. To the extent that “the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion”, (Asad 2003: 200), the reverse is also true: “religious symbols...cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always present.” (Asad 1993: 53).

One case instance of the secular-religious interface, and its projection in cyberspace, concerns Islamism and politics. By Asad’s reasoning, there is no an either/or chasm but a both/and set of choices that face all Islamists. Islamists want to control the nation-state without becoming secular nationalists. A moderate Islamist, such as the Egyptian born, Qatari scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, feels that it is not only possible but also desirable to be both “a Muslim citizen” (Zeghal in Zaman/Hefner 2006:127) and a passport-carrying citizen of a majority Muslim ‘secular’ nation-state, whether Egypt, Turkey or Indonesia. Of course, this dual citizenship option

is not supported by all Islamists, and what needs to be stressed is that the epistemic leap it requires is more plausible for upperclass netizens, that is, Muslims linked to one another through the Internet on the World-Wide Web, than it is for the mass of Muslims, those whose horizons are still transfixed by local, regional and also national loyalties that often put them at odds with their Muslim compatriots.

In considering the fate of minorities and their trajectory within a nation-state where the majority of their compatriots are not co-religionists, how do minorities benefit from participation in public space marked as cyberspace, a space that is no longer territorially limited but is it at once both virtual and transnational? To the extent that the minorities are marked as “Muslim” or “Christian”, secular practices will interact with religious norms, and each group or community will seek a platform in cyberspace where they can project their loyalty but also offer outside ‘others’ the unending dialectic of choice provided by the World Wide Web.

I have argued elsewhere that both Islam and Muslims are bound up with the Information Technology Revolution (cooke & Lawrence 2005:19-24). It is necessary to see how Muslim networks have evolved in the past decade in order to trace what is their impact on non-Muslim minorities in majority Muslim states or the reverse, the opportunity they present for Muslim minorities in majority Christian states.

The Internet is the most dramatic but only the latest of several indices in the communications revolution that marked the late 20th century global economy and also transformed the nature of Muslim networks. There were cassette tapes that helped foster the Iranian revolution. There was satellite TV that overrode governmental controls on local TV stations to beam alternative Muslim messages, including cleric talk shows, fatwa workshops and a variety of Islamic entertainment to Arabic-speaking audiences, and

since 1997, there has emerged a major alternative to CNN style global news has been provided through the Gulf based Al-Jazeera. CD-ROMs, too, have become popular, circulating both literary texts and visual artefacts to broad Muslim audiences. Finally, there has been the Internet, which offers many networking options, from chat groups to websites, and, of course, email. All these options for expanded exchange and alternative authorities rely on access and speed but, even more, on the need for new criteria of trust.

These new conditions for the exchange of information have generated new kinds of networks, most notably transnational alliances of women who are working for conflict resolution, human security and justice at the local and global levels. Since the 1980s, and particularly since the 1985 UN conference on women in Nairobi, networks of Muslim women have been fighting for their rights in a newly Islamizing political context where women's rights and roles are highly contested. Some of these women's networks are local, like the ones that have appeared in Pakistan, Sudan and Algeria, others have a global reach, like the Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) whose Islamic feminist agenda is to empower women to seek their rights as observant Muslims, and it includes exchange of information about ways to deal with gender discrimination and also transnational collaboration to reform Muslim Personal Law so that it be more friendly to women (see <http://www.wluml.org>).

Muslim networks have also functioned to confront the dominant power structure through asymmetrical means of warfare. After 11 September 2001 the Bush 43 administration marked terrorism as, above all, Muslim inspired, even while proclaiming that Islam itself was not to blame, just certain Muslims. Many news groups have referred to Al-Qa'ida, the guerrilla organization linked to the Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden and co-founded by the Egyptian doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri, as a terrorist

network. It is terrorist insofar as it intends to destroy Western, specifically American, targets wherever it can find them. And it is also a network precisely because it is structured around nodes that communicate with one another in non-linear space, relying on neither a hierarchical chain of command nor conventional rules of engagement. Al-Qa'ida might be best defined as a coalition of dispersed network nodes intent on waging asymmetrical warfare. Like Colombian and Mexican drug cartels, they feature small, nimble, and dispersed units capable of penetrating and disrupting, with the intent to destroy, massive structures. Often they elude pursuit and evade capture, although in the case of al-Qa'ida, its operatives kill themselves, or are killed by others, in each nodal attack on a fixed target or group.

While the case of al-Qa'ida has become compelling in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, there is another case that demonstrates the long term organizational power of modern day Islamic networking. The women of Afghanistan became a subject of intense scrutiny after the US-led invasion in October 2001. Much media footage was devoted to the oppression of veiled, secluded and often brutalized Afghan women, yet decades before 11 September 2001 a network of Afghan women had mobilized, and also projected themselves, their history and their cause, via the Internet. RAWA, or Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, predated the Internet. It was founded in 1977, even before the Soviet invasion, and it worked to defeat the Soviets but also to provide help for Afghani refugees in Pakistan. It was a network of transnational cooperation and multi-tiered resistance throughout the 80's and 90's, its pivotal role on behalf of Afghani women has been dramatized through cyberspace (<http://www.rawa.org>) RAWA, even more than al-Qa'ida, demonstrates not just the persistence but

the resilience of Muslim networks as a major form of social and political organization in the Information Age.

Muslim networks no longer are primarily male-dominated structures, nor do they feature only the majority groups. They include women and other minorities who resist oppression and who participate in horizontal alliances that project Muslim values of justice. Above all, they seek to build structures that are at once democratic and capitalist yet not coeval with Euro-American imperialism, and so at one level, the cybernetic revolution has provided, and continues to provide, unprecedented opportunities for local and transnational community formation. Whether Muslims aggregate in virtual associations, such as cybermuslim chat groups, or actual networks, such as Women Living under Muslim Laws, they project a common pattern of fragmentation, dispersal, and re-aggregation. In this era of mass migration when violence and economic necessity have forced many to travel, diasporic Muslims are split from their birth communities. They are compelled to negotiate multiple speaking positions as they imagine and project national identities. Nationalism today, though geographically devolved, remains socially networked through language and systems of meaning which allow participants to share cultural practices and experiences. People are able to diversify their participation in various communities to reflect shared interests rather than shared place or shared ancestry. They may also form contingent virtual communities to respond to emergencies at the collective and individual levels, as well as to provide companionship, social support and a sense of solidarity.

Yet the Information Age does not provide a silver bullet or a full proof juridical tool for enacting democracy. It remains an age defined by media, whether print (newspapers), auditory (the radio and telephone), or auditory-visual (television, cassettes, and movies) or print-auditory-visual-

tactile (the World Wide Web). The World Wide Web represents the culmination of a process the further consequences of which no one yet knows. Muslims, while they did not create the World Wide Web, have been among its beneficiaries, but mostly in those nodes of the global capitalist community where Muslims work and live and pray either in their own cosmopolitan centers or as part of the demographic pluralism of Western Europe, North America and South/Southeast Asia. The impact of these networks has been examined in a spate of scholarly works (Mandaville 2001, Bunt 2000/2003, and Eickelman/Anderson 1999, Hirschkind 2006). While some have predicted a cyberutopia, imagining that the World Wide Web can fulfill the promises left on the table by development theorists from the 60s, differences in virtual space are proving to be as durable and multiple as ground level disparities within the *umma*. [For a still more radical notion of *umma* as no longer territorial, see Roy 2004, espec. 335-40.]

Not only will there be a limited number of Muslims who have access to the World Wide Web but those who do become Muslim netizens will find many competing notions of Islamic loyalty and options for ritual practice. It will also continue to matter where one resides: in Malaysia or Turkey the government is less prone to monitor or to filter websites than in Saudi Arabia or Syria, and while hacking can take place as easily within a cyber Islamic environment as elsewhere, it will occur more often in border zones of actual conflict, such as Palestine and Kashmir. Because information technologies, like religious traditions, are inherently conservative, they tend to reinforce global structures and asymmetries rather than to bode a new era for civil society and transformative justice. Diasporic Muslims, precisely because they live in Western Europe or North America, will benefit from the Information Technology Revolution more

than their homeland co-religionists. The disparity between North and South, between rich and poor will be as evident, alas, among Muslims as it is among non-Muslims, at least for the foreseeable future.

Religious Minorities and Cyber Space

This analysis has special relevance for minorities. Both revolutions – the secular nation-state and the cyberspace of the new umma – have left minorities at risk. Where are they foregrounded in current literature? In addition to the vast social science literature on (mostly non-religious) minorities, sundry historical analyses on Minority Treaties (especially Arendt 1948/73: 269-90), and the teeming, often contradictory critical theory analyses of secular notions of political/social order, there exists a spate of publications on Copts in Egypt, best represented by Bayly 2002 and Oram 2004, and a broad spectrum of approaches to Christians in Southeast Asia, from the missionary/dialogic (McAmis 2003) to the anthropological (Kipp/Rogers 1987) to the reconstructionist (Husein 2005). In contrast to monograph or article-length explorations of the ‘Moro Problem’ in the Philippines, little has been written about Harar in the contemporary period, though it is often cited as the fourth most holy city in Islam (after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem) by Africanists. What all extant studies of African/Asian religious minorities share is close attention to local actors, institutions, and practices, but without an encompassing comparative perspective that addresses either the historical role of the state or the decisive import of minority experiences in the public square.

The only monograph to date that looks at the impact of the Internet on community formation and redefinition is Blank 2001. An ethnographic triangulation of history, biography and interviews, *Mullahs on the Mainframe* addresses the small Ismaili sect, Daudi Bohras, and largely

commends their success in integrating traditional cultural norms with instrumental modernity while also embracing political quietism. It touches but briefly on Hindu-Muslim riots in mid-1990s India and Shi'i- Sunni conflicts in late 1990s Karachi (Blank 2001:275-82)

The most important model for what needs to be done, albeit in a more extended and nuanced historical study, with contemporary policy relevance, is Friend 2006. The purpose of this slim volume is to shed light on the implications of shared space and convergent historical experience for understanding the cultural integration of two disparate majority religions – Islam and Christianity. Though the conclusions are more hortatory than documentary, the purpose is clear and hopeful: to highlight multi-confessional nationalism as at once a secular and a religious advance. It is an advance that needs to be sought not just for the Phil-Indo Archipelago but also for the Horn of Africa and the Muslim world in general, and it can not be charted apart from the options, which are also the limits, of cyber space.

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