

Review – Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonization and World Order

Written by Darren Atkinson

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DARREN ATKINSON, OCT 23 2014

Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonization and World Order

By S. Sayyid

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Who or what is a Muslim and what are they searching for? As demonstrated by recent media controversies involving celebrity comedians and their intellectual gurus, this seemingly simple question is notoriously difficult to answer without sounding facile and hypocritical and appears to stem from a failure of commentators to undertake reflexive historical and cultural self-examination. The dystopian fantasies that have led to distinguished critics such as Sam Harris to reflect that 'Mainstream Islam *itself* represents an extremist rejection of intellectual honesty, gender equality, secular politics and genuine pluralism' (my emphasis), and for liberal media outlets to uncritically warn their readers about increased risk of threats of violence due to so-called "terrorist chatter", appears to be well and truly entrenched in Western discursive representations of the religion of Islam and its followers. With the growth of ISIS as the apparent pre-eminent threat to the foundations of the international system and the apparent failure of Islam to neatly follow the path of Christianity towards secularization and 'moderation', the time appears to be ripe for a critical re-examination of how Islam is understood as both a religion and a political project. It is into this breach that S. Sayyid steps with his thought-provoking, digressive (in the best-sense of the word) and learned new book *Recalling the Caliphate*.

Back in 1994, Sayyid wrote of how radical secularizing Muslim leaders, termed 'Kemalists' (after Mustapha Kemal Atatürk), '...followed a twin-track strategy with respect to Islam...they attempted to marginalize Islam as a public discourse, while simultaneously seeking to gain control of Islamic institutions'.^[1] This strategy, which led to the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, appeared to present the future of Islam as a private concern outside of the structures of the secular state. However, as suggested by Sayyid at the time, and now understood in even more explicit terms through the appearance of militant groups using overt Islamic terms of reference, Islam did not recede into a purely private affair. In fact Islam, through its inculcation away from the state into the sphere of civil society, has become rearticulated as a political discourse that appears to challenge the conception that the specific historical development of the West is universal to all cultures, religions and regions. This challenge has led to the restating of concepts of Islamic history which are contested and difficult to comprehend, even from within the Islamic tradition. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the concept of the "caliphate", a term used both as a tool through which to highlight the dangers of Islam and as a rallying point by militants that rejects the colonization and secularization of Muslim-majority lands.

Sayyid, through a process he terms "Critical Muslim Studies" attempts to come to intellectual grips with the concept of the caliphate, which, in his view, is not so much a concrete political goal, but '...a metaphor for the struggles between Muslim aspirations to re-order the postcolonial world and the investments in the continuation of the violent hierarchies of coloniality' (p.15). In order to do this the book is split into two specific, yet, interlinked parts. The first explores the nature of Muslim identity in relation to terms of Western discourse including Liberalism, Secularism, Relativism and Democracy. Through this approach Sayyid is able to highlight how, through a process of Orientalism of knowledge, Islam is represented in a way that restricts its practitioners from engaging in dialogue with the

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intellectuals and powerbrokers of the West (see, for example, his exploration of Ayatollah Khatami's reflections on Tocqueville, pp 20-29). Perhaps the key critique of the book suggests that history itself is controlled and understood through universalising Western experience, a process termed "Plato to Nato" (p. 37). Nowhere is this more apparent than within the articulation of secularization as a pre-requisite for modernity and how, to Western elites, the reappearance of the concept of the caliphate suggests a dangerous Islamic myopia. Indeed, as Sayyid notes, '...secularization in the West is not seen as being a contingent development arising out of a specific history of the West, but as a necessary condition arising out of the unfolding of history itself' (p. 35).

Sayyid shows how this universalising approach to Western experience doesn't just ignore historical examples of previously flourishing Islamic civilizations, but also restricts the very idea that it's possible for a "modern" Islamic political entity, built on a form of Islamic social justice, to ever exist. From this point onwards, the second part of the book builds on the established critical framework and attempts to re-articulate Muslim subjectivity as a counterpoint to the West. Sayyid doesn't offer clear policy analysis, or a framework for reform that would allow Islam to become free of colonial representations, but he presents ideas and reflections on how this can be achieved, as well as discussing the many difficulties that would likely come to the fore should Muslims succeed in bringing Islam back into what he describes as the "political" through reinstating a caliphate. For example, what does an "Islamic" state look like with regards to political order and economics? And, what exactly links the *ummah*, beyond Islam itself, and is it feasible to imagine a polity based solely on this concept? Sayyid doesn't offer asinine suggestions to solve the "Muslim Question", but suggests that the goal of Muslims should be to reclaim their history and restate it on their own terms (pp. 117-191).

"Recalling the caliphate", concludes Sayyid, "...is a decolonial declaration, it is a reminder that Islam is Islam, and for Muslims that is all it needs to be" (p. 191). This final statement is an excellent distillation of the arguments offered throughout the book. For too long analysts and officials have been content to discuss and represent Islam through a prism constructed by the West and its institutions. There is precious little discussion on how the history of colonialism in the Muslim world hasn't just affected the material conditions in the countries that have been brought into "modernity" through the establishment of secular or authoritarian states, but has also had a major impact on how Islam itself is understood by the very people who call themselves Muslims. The representation of Islam that is seen today is a product of history and politics and economics. To imagine that Islam itself is responsible for rise of groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS is an approach steeped in ahistorical assumptions and ignorance of the history of Islam; as is the suggestion that, only through a process of "reformation" analogous to the one that took place in Christendom, will it be possible for Islam to become a functioning component of the international order. If Islam is to be reformed it will only be through a process of Muslims taking control of what it means to be Muslim, outside of the discourse of colonialism and the machinations of the hegemonic order. *Recalling the Caliphate* is an important and stimulating work which seeks to assist in this process.

Footnotes

[1] B.S. Sayyid, 1994, 'Sign O' Times' in E. Laclau (Ed.) 'The Making of Political Identities', London, Verso, p. 271.

About the author:

Darren Atkinson is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Otago, New Zealand and is a Commissioning Editor at E-IR. His current research is focused on exploring the history, development and transformation of left-wing political groups in Afghanistan. His recent publications include: 'The Left Radical of Afghanistan: Finding Trotsky after Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao?' (*South Asian Multidisciplinary Academic Journal, SAMAJ – 2014*) and 'Democracy as Theatre: The 2014 Presidential Elections in Afghanistan' (*E-International Relations – 2014*). He can be contacted at atkda504@student.otago.ac.nz and followed on Twitter @darrenatkinson.

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