

THE CIVIC POLITICS OF ISLAM: BEYOND THE  
DICHOTOMY OF CIVIL SOCIETY VS.  
ANTI-POLITICS

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Z. Fareen PARVEZ, *Politicizing Islam: The Islamic Revival in France and India* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017)

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As Z. Fareen Parvez tells us boldly and transparently at the beginning of her eloquent book *Politicizing Islam: The Islamic Revival in France and India*, the frequently evoked act of politicizing Islam is primarily an enterprise of secular states, however different their secularism may be articulated—as in the cases of France and India, the two countries where the author conducted fieldwork on the biggest Muslim minorities in Western Europe and Asia. It is a politicization that occurs “voraciously” [Parvez 2017: 2], by means of a surveillance and repression of Muslim communities which is often centered on mosques.

France and India are known, Parvez reminds us, for frequent aggressions, and systematic policing, of Muslim populations. These policies often target citizens and residents who occupy the lowest echelons of the social ladder and who are often stigmatized through the use of a racialized discourse that state authorities often share with mainstream media. The politicization of Islam by secular state apparatuses often occurs when Muslim communities withdraw from the realm of active citizenship, and in this sense de-politicize themselves. This is a mutual process. The politicization of Islam from above is a major factor in the de-politicization of Muslim communities, since it excludes them from active citizenship by questioning their cultural competence to exercise citizenship within a secular framework.

Why does Parvez define these measures of politicization of Islam by secular states as “voracious”? It is because states see in these policies an opportunity to reaffirm their political legitimacy as providers of a secular republican order by scapegoating an allegedly dangerous “minority.” The inheritance of colonial policies (directly, through the French colonial state, and indirectly, through the Indian postcolonial state) have helped identify Muslim minorities as homogenous and, often, homogeneously dangerous and in need of special surveillance.

Particularly in France, and due to inherited administrative practices validated by a colonial supremacist ideology, Islam has been

consistently considered the exception to the rule of *laïcité* [Parvez 2017: 35]. More than a sheer state neutrality toward all religions, *laïcité* purports a diversified regulation of religious commitments oriented to the advantages, or dangers, that such commitments can generate, with regard to the exigencies of secular governance [Parvez 2017: 38]. However, after more careful scrutiny, Islam does not represent an absolute exception, but rather occupies the highest degree on a scale measuring the indocile, and potentially dangerous, dimension of religions from the viewpoint of secular governance. Parvez's idea of Islam as an exception could be understood as justifying the state's circumvention of its own approach to citizenship and equal rights in the name of a superior interest, of a state of exception that in some instances can become *de facto* permanent. As much as the politicization of Islam is the making of the secular state, so is the exception intrinsic to its governance. The anxiety to escape this state of exception has often induced the Muslim middle classes in France to vie for state recognition and normalization, at the expense of supporting the socio-economic needs of Muslim populations in low-income neighborhoods.

The French colonial approach to the vexed question of Muslim women's "veiling" set an important precedent with regard to how the politicization of Islam by the state could be supported by a unilateral politicization of gender issues. In the Indian case, the colonial inheritance is still tangible in how the state understands secularism as a regulation of religious communities that British colonialism froze into "majority-minority" relations, also for the sake of "elite manipulation" [Parvez 2017: 49]. Exposed to the contingency of the formation of political majorities, this regulation can be strongly hierarchical and puts a particular pressure on subaltern Muslims. Parvez convincingly shows how this politicization of Islam-*cum*-gender was often reproduced by Muslim elites and middle classes in their rather unilateral approach to overseeing the life conduct of Muslim women. In response, "women stood at the forefront of the Islamic revival in both Lyon, France, and Hyderabad, India, increasingly wearing and defending the headscarf or other forms of veiling, leading mosque classes and teaching circles, and mobilizing along the lines of their identification with Islam" [Parvez 2017: 23].

Parvez focuses on largely subaltern, lower-income women. She shows how the gender policies the states promoted via an identitarian stigmatization of what they saw as gender-biased Islamic norms were confronted through a proactive gender politics by Muslim women.

This politics appears as articulated in forms of a religious idiom manifesting how subaltern consciousness can support a movement of socio-economic and civic revitalization. Clearly, veiling is not an isolated factor in this counterpolitics of gender. Islam itself is not necessarily the centerpiece but a concurring, both motivating and legitimizing, force. This is largely missed in the way in which secular political discourse and mainstream media systematically explain away as a religiously motivated rebellion in the name of Islam the socio-political reasons of protests staged by strongly disadvantaged groups who happen to be Muslim—and therefore understandably may use resources drawn from their traditions in order to voice their grievances.

Given the above, the first key thesis of Parvez is that the French and Indian states, including their political elites and media systems, supplement their surveillance and policing of subaltern Muslims by politicizing Islam through a politics of conditioned recognition and representation of Muslims as a minority. This approach is often mediated by Muslim elites and educated middle classes. The recognition is rather indirect in the French case, where a minority identity is officially denied, and quite direct in the Indian version of secularism, which pursues the goal of a peaceful coexistence of religious communities under the unifying umbrella of citizenship. The author's conclusion is that the French approach ends up de-politicizing, and ultimately de-legitimizing and erasing from the political agenda, the goals of socio-cultural inclusion and socio-economic redistribution in favor of a sector of the population that suffers disproportionately from unemployment and limited access to resources and services, including health and education.

Z. Fareen Parvez's research design is inscribed in two intense and deeply empathetic ethnographies of Muslim communities in the cities of Lyon and Hyderabad. The focus in each case is on a triangle constituted by the state, the Muslim elites and middle classes, and Muslim low-income groups. The medium term in the relationship—the Muslim elites and middle classes—is in both cases decisive in determining how Muslims may or may not be able to counter the state's policies of politicizing Islam. Conceptually, the investigation is framed through a contrast between an ideal concept of participatory politics and the opposite danger of falling into anti-politics. While the Indian case approximates the first virtuous scenario, even if by way of Muslim autonomy from state institutions, the French case slides inexorably toward the second, in spite of valiant efforts aimed at building solidarity networks by many individual actors, mainly women, whom the author acknowledges as her "companions." This

is a crucial argument, indicating that the institutional and power strictures of the European type of state prototypically incarnated by France, along with its forms of secular governance, do not necessarily prevail on a global scale. Even if fundamentally repressive of Muslim populations, the policies of the Indian state and its model of secularism allow for avenues of participation and opportunities of self and community flourishing to Muslim actors in Hyderabad, both among the middle classes and the urban poor.

In my view, however, both cases could be read as different articulations of the potential of civility inherent within Islamic traditions, which are obviously affected by state policies but are ultimately resistant to them if hostile. This civility consists in building the self from the inside-out through learning and practice in modern urban contexts, such as those explored by Parvez. Civility in such cases empowers the fostering of significant bonds aided by patterns of accountability, cooperation, and mutual trust emanating from religious discourse and underlying injunctions and instructions. This notion of an Islamically inflected civility could apply to both cases in spite of all their differences, which are mainly due to the differing types of secular rule and to the corresponding articulation of the heritage of colonial ruling and categorizations of Muslim populations.

When I emphasize civility, I refer to a driver of action that does not presuppose a formalized civil society operating through NGOs and political initiatives and ultimately interfacing with the state, whether through cooperation and/or by conscious partial autonomization. Civility is rather a dynamic and often mutating dimension of conduct and action innervating a variety of Islamic traditions, pious and less pious—and occasionally even less-than-pious. The development of this concept from an Islamic perspective owes to the formation of the field of the “sociology of Islam” that had been pioneered since the 1970s by Marshall Hodgson<sup>1</sup> and Bryan Turner.<sup>2</sup> By proposing the notion of civility I offer a complement, more than an alternative, to the author’s adoption of a framework pitching good community work facilitated by Islamic tenets and practices (India) against a sheer privatization of these tenets and practices ultimately leading to anti-politics (France). Based on my proposition, the Hyderabad and Lyon cases could be interpreted as diverging outcomes of comparable

<sup>1</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, 1974, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press).

<sup>2</sup> Bryan S. Turner, 2013, *The Sociology of Islam. Collected Essays of Bryan S. Turner* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate).

attempts to articulate civic practices through an Islamic idiom under quite different circumstances determined by social location/dislocation, class relationships, and secular practices emanating from the state.

The insisting appreciation of “community” in the book, purportedly surrogating the lack of proper citizen participation given the discriminatory policies of the two secular states, may point to how civility, which is a component of citizen participation when duly encouraged (or not discouraged), ultimately cuts through secular and religious grammars and can work even when states actively operate against specific religious groups—in this case based on the suspicion of Islamic radicalism working against secular values and undermining the state’s security. I am suggesting that the religious tradition itself, and its related practices, should preferably not be encapsulated by default within community and its affectivity, with its rather exclusive sense of belonging.

Far from being confined to *Gemeinschaft*, traditions enact a value rationality that contributes to *Gesellschaft*. Affects and belonging themselves can feed into this rationality, which in modern urban settings often intersects the instrumental and competitive sides of city life. This is visible in the intense competitions for patronage over the poorer classes among the middle classes and elite networks and organizations of Hyderabad studied by Parvez. They vie for influence over the urban poor through welfare projects and clientelistic redistribution, which also amounted to a form of benevolent disciplining intended to preclude radicalization. They help women from low-income groups seeking skills and self-employment, and with it alternative forms of honor. India’s combination of a flexible and pluralistic, albeit hierarchical secularism allowed for cross-class relations within the Muslim community. If there is any “radical” outcome in this process it is to be seen in the radiant character of self-help and largely autonomous Muslim female collective agency within poor neighborhoods, based on patterns of mutual accountability and deeply ingrained solidarity imbued with a Muslim ethos of sisterhood: “The liberal demand that religious arguments must translate into secular terms to participate in democracy in this case appears out of place” [Parvez 2017: 19].

In contrast, in Lyon middle-class associations struggled for state recognition and rights and often shied away from contact with the urban poor who were considered on the fringe of society and permanently at risk of radicalization. The “integration” game was

between higher classes connected, or seeking connections, to the state; the price to be paid was abandoning the lower, working classes from the marginalized *banlieues* to becoming state targets. This approach pushed the latter groups to withdraw from public life and institutional involvement, a process resulting in what the author calls anti-politics, basically centered on surrendering to divine will. This categorization probably does not do justice to the findings themselves of the complex ethnography masterfully conducted by the author in Lyon. By proposing a focus on different articulations of civility softening the dichotomy between community and anti-politics, I am not suggesting that we should squeeze Islamic traditions into a Western concept. I would rather highlight that Western social-scientific notions, including civility, can be recalibrated and, if necessary, critiqued through case studies (including ethnographies) drawn from Islamic contexts. This step helps in rethinking how civility unfolds on a global scale within and across a variety of traditions, and more specifically how it is articulated among the urban poor and subaltern. This might be a way to, so to speak, “un-discipline” concepts that we tightly associate with Western traditions of social and political thought, rather than simply parochializing them.

One example from the Old City of Hyderabad recounted by Parvez, which could be understood through the lenses of the idea of civility as a process, are the loudspeaker announcements of the Masjid Arabiya mosque, with calls to give to the needy and exercise compassion and solidarity [Parvez 2017: 98]. These communicative practices do not seem to merely constrain people to help others by giving. They work as a channel, through a simple technology, to externalize and magnify the work that neighborhood dwellers already undertake by themselves and among themselves. This is the work of valorizing the value rationality of tradition, in order to cement the social bond through forms of solidarity responding to Islamic injunctions: “Their politics were not about Islamizing the state or otherwise transforming its secular foundations. Instead, they simply intertwined religious teachings with practices of citizenship that build social trust” [Parvez 2017: 96].

Likewise, Parvez’s analysis of the Hyderabad case tells us that men can be supportive of women’s activities through funding and giving, so contributing to avoiding the pitfalls of the anti-politics of Lyon. The author also notes that men remain on the sidelines of those activities. All of this is insightful, but a superficial interpretation of such a male contribution to a women-centered community could stir

up the (French) suspicion of a “communitarian” short-circuit. One could see in the men’s external support of women’s activities a shrewd, cynical way to patronize, protect, and control women and keep them segregated. This is particularly the case since, if we argue along this line of suspicion, by receiving such support women may have fewer incentives to rebel against male dominance. Yet by adopting the lenses of the civility patterns enacted within a given tradition, this phenomenon of external support could be interpreted as a value-rational way of developing a kind of division of labor (between active actors and helpers/supporters) in a context that preserves undoubtedly imbalanced gender roles but also valorizes the flourishing of human beings across gender distinctions—and in this particular case additionally amounts to a recognition of the rising prestige, dignity, and ultimately power of women in the community.

Of course, the fact that a specific Islamic articulation of a pattern of civility is value-rational does not exempt (or protect) it from exposure to internal and external criticism. In this case, it is not illegitimate to criticize those gender roles even from within the Islamic tradition, which is what some elite and middle-class benefactors—clearly benefiting from their socio-economically and educationally privileged position—tend to do. Tradition is not just an ongoing search for coherence and stability which crystallizes into positions of authority. It is an ongoing and highly unstable interpretive contention. Especially in modern urban contexts the always contingent winners in such contentions acquire authority as speakers for the tradition, but not for too long and often only in circumscribed settings. The Hyderabad women from subaltern classes are fully habilitated to play this game of tradition and articulate civility for their own benefit, as well as for the good of their larger groups. I would also contend that the collapse of civil society and the erosion of trust in the state (exemplified by the case of Lyon’s *banlieues* which the author takes as the epitome of anti-politics, retreating into “de-territorialized... inner spaces”: [Parvez 2017: 21–22]) does not entail the implosion of civility either. It might signify the opening of an alternative pursuit of civility along lines that may reenact, or reasonably imitate, some traditional Islamic practices. And it produced radical forms of collective autonomy: “Salafist women rejected both the state and men, or any other family members, as their agents of liberation” [165]. They often chose to don the veil, even the full-face veil (the *niqab*), against the will of their husbands.

It is certainly important to investigate the multiple conditioning and limitations these practices are subject to, as Parvez does, because

of the collapse of civil society and trust in the state, which is largely due to the policies of the French secular state according to her diagnosis. This is clearly a suboptimal situation for successfully articulating Islamic patterns of civility. Yet it is still valuable to uncover such patterns under challenging conditions. Here is where the idea of anti-politics may not adequately reflect the intense and fine-grained work of reconstruction of the self-other nexus which Parvez observed in the spaces she co-inhabited with her companions. One can fully understand the suffocating feeling of being abandoned and trapped that this experience entailed, both for Parvez's companions and for the participating ethnographer herself. However, this situation need not be interpreted simply as a taking of refuge into the private sphere or as deploying a socially defensive type of political subjectivity—the very little that seems left out when civic participation is first eroded and then burned out. The sharp isolation of subaltern Muslim women from the Muslim middle classes in Lyon could be interpreted as favoring patterns of highly informal, potentially autonomous civility. This situation is well captured by what the author calls “non-instrumental practice” [Parvez 2017: 27]. She rightly stresses that this is not only a practice accruing to subject-formation in the ways famously explored and popularized by Saba Mahmood.<sup>3</sup> Z. Fareen Parvez maintains that, in order to be tangible, this type of practice should feed into community cohesion and welfare. Her assessment that more than a few pious Muslim women from Lyon commit to study and practice Islam intensely in order to fight their alienation from French society is probably the best proof of the risk we are running if we leave this civic dimension of Islam unappreciated—even more when the secular state tends to demonize and lump together such articulations of civility under the simplifying and derogatory heading of a dangerous, atavistic radicalism.

The fact that the value rationality of civic articulations of tradition is strictly intertwined with the purposive rationality of enterprise and making a living in the professional sphere is exemplarily demonstrated in the Hyderabad case. Here the author narrates that her companions often discussed the received Islamic teachings during their tailoring training, and planned to set up a revolving loan program within the Islamic study circles. The mutual encouragement among the women to work harder brings to light an affective and moral factor that promotes the value-rational dimension of the process. The affective

<sup>3</sup> Saba Mahmood, 2005, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).



dimension, however, may have hardly survived by itself in such difficult and deprived urban settings. It is probably preferable not to conceptualize this affective dimension of “community” in isolation from the value rationality of the tradition which nourishes civility.

Saba Mahmood has substantially expanded the radius of her previous analysis of women’s “politics of piety” historically and theoretically in her latest book by arguing that privatizing religion within modern societies is a way to de-politicize politics [Mahmood 2016: 13-14].<sup>4</sup> It is the state that, while privatizing religion, de-politicizes Islam’s value-rational dimension of civility and, as we saw, surreptitiously politicizes Islam’s alleged reluctance to accept this privatization. The Muslim women Z. Fareen Parvez worked with were not privatizing their religious practices in response to hostility from the state—unless one assumes that they were unwillingly and tragically playing into the hands of a state that disenfranchises them by simultaneously privatizing the participatory potential of their religious commitments and politicizing these commitments as a potential public threat.

Reducing one’s relation to God and related practices to an ego-centered, ultimately nihilistic private sphere risks reproducing the accusations leveled by the French secular state against these forms of life conduct. The author shows instead how this supposedly private commitment spills over during instances of dense interfacing with institutions, for example, when the women seek the services of the public health sector. These are moments of attrition, conflict, and suffering, but not of valueless retreat. They make tangible the contentions over values, over the control of one’s body, which provide the fundamental fault-lines of civility. An unfavorable institutional environment does not annihilate the value of Islamic knowledge resources entirely. Practices can still be enacted at a sub-institutional level inspired by the civility of Islam that antedates the Westphalian and colonial state. The idea-metaphor of the “heart” as an organ of (also social) knowledge, which the author highlights in some key passages, is central to the tradition and can be emphasized by Salafis and Sufis alike—it is therefore not just a cover for an alienated escape into the private sphere. The cultivation of *sabr* (patience) facilitates the process of reforming/nourishing of the heart, a process that also exalts individuality, and a path to dignity, opened up by fully “living the present moment” [Parvez 2017: 173-177].

<sup>4</sup> Saba Mahmood, 2016, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).

Civility is not a space, like civil society or even community. We could conceive of it as a thread (or as a set of intertwined threads) of action enacted through an ensemble of self-propelling, mostly value-oriented rationales, often against all surrounding social and political odds. Religious commitments would have in themselves much less traction without being imbricated in this process. The cultural resources of a knowledge-based religious tradition can be a source of empowerment even in a secular context like the French one, which is not as settled as it purports to be.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mayanthi L. Fernando, 2014, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham/London, Duke University Press).