Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus

Andrew March
New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 350 pages.

In *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus*, Andrew March asks if Muslims can draw on Islamic doctrinal resources to support living as a minority in secular liberal democracies? His answer is a thoroughly researched and argued "Yes." This work of political philosophy provides a cogent rebuttal to the Islamophobic narrative common in certain circles that Muslims are a fifth column – cuckoo hatchlings waiting for demographic dominance before Islamizing their host nations.

The author's detailed and critical analysis is long overdue, particularly given the debates about Muslims in western countries that have polarized opinions on such issues as France's "burqa-bans" or the United States' "war on terror." There is also a wider context: addressing how religious doctrines can be subordinated to secular authority, which is asked by others with sacred law-based religions, among them Orthodox Jews, Catholics, and Baha'is. Further, for those interested in strengthening commitment to civil society, March presents belief-sourced reasons for supporting the argument that liberal democracy can shore up support among the religious faithful who are not necessarily swayed by secular arguments.

In regard to Islam, March's thesis is that some ideas about liberal citizenship harmonize even with conservative, classical Islamic opinions, although sometimes Muslims need to draw on more modern, reformist resources. This is not necessarily a problem because, as scholar and professor of law Khaled Abou El Fadl points out, Islamic law is not a fixed canon but rather a creative process (p. 264). The doctrinal resources used for March's analysis are drawn from those dealing primarily with Islamic law (in Arabic and various European languages): exegesis, hadith commentary, jurisprudence, and substantive legal-ethical rulings. He does dip rather eclectically into a variety of classical authors, contemporary traditionalist and modernist scholars, as well as the political writings of twentieth-century Islamists.

The book would be strengthened with a section, or at least a few paragraphs in the introduction, to contextualize the sources used in order to give the reader a sense of their comparative weight of authority. Readers who are unfamiliar with the landscape of Islamic scholarship will probably find it difficult to navigate the large swathes of time, geography, and interpretative orientation as March jumps, for example, from neo-Mu‘tazili Abou El Fadl to American-based Palestinian mufti Shaykh Muhammad al-Hanooti and then to thirteenth-century Shafi‘i heavy-weight Imam al-Nawawi – all on the same page (p. 169).

Islam and Liberal Citizenship is divided into three parts. In the first, “Justificatory Comparative Political Theory: The Search for Overlapping Consensus Through ‘Conjecture,’” March outlines the Rawlsian framework for understanding liberal citizenship: secular, liberal democracies can be supported by “comprehensive doctrines” (great religious and philosophical traditions) in an “overlapping consensus” of political cooperation (pp. 11-12) precisely because the state’s secularity does not require assent to any metaphysical truth-claims. In this part, he also compares his chosen framework with an alternative (discourse ethics) and looks at possible criticisms to seeking religious support for political liberalism, both generally and for Muslims as a stigmatized minority. The author then presents his method of analysis: a three-step process of diagnosis, evaluation, and synthesis. The description and appropriateness of the procedures he follows are well fleshed out and beyond the scope of this review. In brief, his interrogative question to the texts is: “Do the reasons being articulated by Islamic thinkers for accepting liberal constraints on the pursuit of the good indicate the existence of an overlapping consensus?” (p. 88). Furthermore, any acceptance must be principled and not merely tactical for illiberal ends.

The second part, “Islam and Liberal Citizenship: Patterns of Moral Disagreement and Principled Reconciliation,” presents the first set of sources on the objections to citizenship, the “No” answer to whether Muslims may reside under non-Muslim rule. These are the opinions that must be countered by stronger affirmative ones for his case to be made. After this, he outlines key requirements for citizenship affirmation: permissibility of residency, loyalty to the non-Muslim state, recognition of pluralism, commitment to justice, solidarity with other (non-Muslim) citizens, and political participation.

An in-depth analysis of each of the key requirements as they are found in Islamic sources makes up the third section: “Islamic Affirmations of Liberal Citizenship.” March finds that if certain conditions are met – especially the freedom to manifest one’s religion, both overt proselytizing and moral living as testament to Islam’s goodness – there is a stronger argument for the permissibility of Muslim residency.

Next, loyalty to the state can be affirmed through a Muslim’s strict duty to uphold contracts, which citizens enter into both overtly and tacitly through accepting the state’s benefits. March spends some time discussing jihad, including modern reformist interpretations, and the justified exemptions Muslims might seek to avoid conscription in a non-Muslim army, particularly by contributing substantively to protecting the state in another fashion.

March then turns to friendship and solidarity with non-Muslims, including recognition of God's decree of religious diversity and non-Muslims' moral worth on the basis of justice and giving da'wah. He delineates three positions on relationships with non-Muslims: (1) deontological, drawing on divine commands; (2) constructivist, giving permission to enter contracts with non-Muslims; and (3) comprehensive-qualitative, considering the overall benefit to Muslim communities and Islamic aims. Lastly, contributing to the welfare of others, including non-Muslims, is a central Islamic religious ethic, and March finds that the dominant strategy of justifying political participation (not necessarily required by political liberalism) is that there is no prohibition in collaborating with unbelievers for non-religious aims.

Readers should note that this book presumes a working knowledge of political liberalism as well as familiarity with the diversity of Islamic religious law and, in particular, the repercussions of modernity and westernization on Muslim thought and politics. As well as those interested in good governance generally, I recommend this excellent work for those studying political science, inter-religious relations, or Islamic studies, particularly at higher tertiary level.

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