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THE NEW PEW REPORT: *The Postcolonial Piety*

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The new Pew report is a sophisticated and deep report about the role of Islam in the Muslim world. The results of the survey show a high percentage of religiosity, especially in the countries were the Muslim population is dominant – at least - arithmetically. What we examine here is whether the historical transformations in every country in the postcolonial period reveal a common (till a certain point) trajectory regarding the social characteristics and whether an engaged "social religiosity" has been generated.

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The role of religion in the Arab-Muslim identity has been debated for decades, including the controversy that was sparked during the 1970's especially in the Arab World. On one hand, many intellectuals, like the Egyptian Galal Amin, supported the necessity of glorifying religion, and the ways by which ancient Islamic heritage should be incorporated into the modern world, thus shaping a common Muslim culture. On the other hand, there were others, like the Moroccan historian Abdullah Laroui, who regarded religion as being backwards, arguing that we should deconstruct theoretically our societies through Marxist tools[1]. The nationalist and socialist traditions were gradually starting to fade away after the influence they had had in forming the national liberation movements in the so called "third world", except perhaps for the countries that were still under the influence of the socialist bloc. For many people, the spirituality that historical materialism did not include was a deficient analytic tool for explaining the making of the Muslim world. Islam was re-emerging not only as a coordinated religiosity, but also as an alternative political solution. For instance, the religious teachings of Sayyid Qutb had – and still have – a large influence not only in the Arab world but also in the Muslim world in general.

We use this small introduction to show how popular culture was formed in the Arab and Muslim world during the decades after their independence from colonial rule. A new Pew report is engaging with the interrelation of the popular culture and religion in the Muslim world. The Pew report was published a few weeks ago showing that a great majority of the Muslims around the world are very pious, generating feelings of repellence for the western world. The research was conducted during the period 2008 and 2012, and it included questionnaires to 38,000 citizens of 39 countries with Muslim populations of over ten million. The countries surveyed were in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Southern-Eastern Europe. One drawback of the study was that Europe was excluded, which has a population of over 44 million Muslims. The research fields concerned aspects of social and political behaviour of the Muslims in these regions, concluding that "most adherents of the world's second-largest religion are deeply committed to their faith and want its teachings to shape not only their personal lives but also their societies and politics"[2]. The percentage supporting the implementation of Sharia as the official law in their countries varies greatly from region to region. For example, the percentage of supporters for Sharia in Sub-Saharan countries is mostly above 60%. The country with the highest percentage favouring Sharia is Nigeria (86%), while Tanzania is the one with the lowest support (37%). The MENA and South Asia regions showed very high levels of support, with individual country percentages mostly over 70%. In Afghanistan, there is near unanimity of up to 99%. At the same time in countries like Egypt, Iraq and Jordan the percentage favouring Islamic law is 91%, 74% and 71% respectively. In countries where there is a tradition of state secularism like Turkey, or there is a large Christian population, like Lebanon, the percentages are low, 12% and 29% respectively. Simultaneously, the percentage of people in Central Asia and Southern-Eastern Europe who want Sharia applied in their countries is very low; in Russia, only 4 from 10 Muslims support Sharia as the official law.[3] The Pew Report attributes these differences to the various legal and political cultures that spread across the Muslim countries, and the impact that the state policies have upon its peoples[4]. The great majority of Muslims though, believe that Sharia should only be implemented on Muslim populations. In all the regions surveyed a median of about 55% support this view.

Regardless whether favouring implementation of Sharia or not, according to the survey a great majority of the Muslim people connect morality with the belief in god. Thus, almost 7 from 10 people in all the regions surveyed argue that belief in god is a prerequisite to be a moral person view is held almost unanimously in the countries of Southeast Asia

(94%) and MENA region (91%), while in Southern-Eastern Europe is up to 61%[5]. Focusing on women's rights the views are mixed. On the question whether the women should have the right to choose to wear the veil or not, the majority in Southern-Eastern Europe (88%), Southeast Asia (79%) and Central Asia (73%) believe women should have the freedom of choice. The (slight) majority in MENA (53%) have the same opinion. Nevertheless, on the question whether women should obey their husbands the answers are contradictory to the previous question, a fact that may reveal established patriarchial relationships that penetrate societies with big inequalities[6]. For instance, in Egypt an 85% believes women should obey their spouses and in Tunisia the percentage rises to 93%. The countries with the lowest support in this belief are Kosovo (34%) and Albania (40%). Generally, questions about women's rights, according to the report, receive a mostly hostile answer, regarding also other issues, like the right to divorce, or the right to inheritance – both often connected to Sharia.

Another important aspect of the survey is understanding how Muslims view democracy and politics in general. The report suggests that the Muslim people prefer democracy against authoritarian regimes, although they prefer religious leaders to have a certain influence on social and political issues. Even though there isn't any rigid position that is common in all the countries, most of them prefer a democratic apparatus that regulates the state. In Ghana and Lebanon we find the highest percentages, more than 81%, while in most of the countries surveyed the percentage in favour of democracy is above 55%. In Egypt the percentage is 55%, in Turkey 67% and in Tunisia 75%. The countries that favour a strong leader with accumulative powers over a democratic state are Russia (35%), Kyrgyzstan (32%) and Pakistan (29%)[7].

Although it is wrong to try to reproduce dominant grant narratives about the homogeneity of the significance of Islam in the Muslim world, it is a common concession the importance of religion in both Muslim popular and political culture[8]. What we should not take for granted is the static and monolithic nature of religion because it is dynamic and is constantly being reshaped and used to reconceptualise people's attitudes in their personal lives and towards the social body. What is interesting about this important survey is that it attributes differing degrees of religiosity to whether or not Islam is the favoured religion of the country. The research does not seem to acknowledge enough the role of global power balance and the internal political and social elaborations that took place after independence in the ex-colonies. The emergence of neo-colonialism after the process of decolonization brought about a new form of power subjection: the economic[9]. Decades of state repression against the Islamists throughout the Muslim world in connection with the neoliberal economic policies of the established governments of the previous colonies, created a dual and odd balance. On the one hand Islamists were demonized for their radical, dangerous and sometimes "terrorist" thought and on the other hand, the neoliberal policies gradually created a more and more marginalized middle class that became a backbone for Islamic impetus in the Muslim societies. Paul Salem believes that the large depoliticization that has taken place in the Muslim world has been a stepping stone for the Islamists to gain a clearer ideological dominance in their countries, while Leonard Binder believes that the ideological convergence between the two main ideologies in the Arab-Muslim world have been facilitated by necessary electoral collaborations in the past[10]. Robert Young adds that it is connected with the East-West historical interaction as well, as we can see a discourse that ignites public memory, referring to heroic narratives, such as the Islamic caliphate of Cordoba, the Crusades and the anti-colonial struggles[11].

The sometimes latent interpretation of Islamic religiosity with radicalism and extremism is sewing a grotesque image of the pious Muslim in the western imaginary. Juan

Cole cites an older Pew report in his book “Engaging the Muslim World,” showing that two-thirds of Americans have at least some prejudice against Islam and Muslims, and nearly half of them doubt the US Muslim’s loyalty to their homeland[12]. Religious consciousness has always been strong in most of the Muslim populations. We are not claiming that the high degree of religiousness that the Pew report shows us is a new construction in the Muslim world. In fact, it verifies that it is an endless process demonstrating the dynamic nature of religion. It is not only the state policies, but also the socio-economic parameters of this Islamic re-emergence which should not be ignored. The interrelation between religion and society is very important and it is very crucial to examine further the features of this ongoing process.

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