

Monica M. Ringer,

Islamic Modernism and the Re-enchantment of the Sacred in

the Age of History, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 208 s.,

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Ringer, Professor of History and Asian Languages and Civilizations at Amherst College in the USA, special research area “the nineteenth-century intellectual history”, begins and finishes the book with the German sociologist Max Weber’s conception “disenchantment” to point out the value of the remarkable questions even in this century such as *Can religion be modern? What would modern religion look like?* and *What is modernity?* by enabling the reader to question the phrases and the point of views of the thinkers throughout the book. This book is a study of the relationship of religion to modernity in the context of Islamic modernism of nineteenth-century and the Ottoman world.

Ringer highlights the value of historicism in all chapters in the book by emphasizing that the researcher convinced that history defined by historicist methodology and epistemology is the essence of modernity at the end of this work. The aim of this book as understanding Islamic modernism in the coherence of other nineteenth-century religious modernisms. The researcher is in the pursuit of the definition of modernism, however Ringer names it “the definitional puzzle” since the term resists definition and it is empirically not easily verified. Instead of looking for the right answer, the author emphasizes the necessity of changing the point of view to search for the relationship of religion to modernity’s epistemic framework.

Historicism, an intellectual epistemic revolution as Ringer points out, enables more comprehensible understanding towards the term. The researcher represent historicism as an earthquake due to reshaping the intellectual landscape. As epistemology and methodology, it is underlined that we need historicism to figure out the reconceptualization of science, history, and religion. The necessity of looking for the stories that modernity tells is also highlighted by emphasizing “viewing modernity as a product of historicism enables us to disentangle modernity’s own claims from empirical reality.” (p. 9). The purpose of the author is to embrace the story of Islamic modernism as a part of nineteenth-century religious modernism, to understand each culture’s context, and to figure out. Throughout the book, comparative perspective is prevailing, and this point of view is beneficial to analyze the commonalities and the differences. Uncovering the differences between Muslim Modernism and Islamic Modernism, Ringer points out Muslim Modernists

as being in conversation not only with European scholarship and Catholic modernism, but more importantly, with their own complex Islamic traditions. With the term of Islamic modernism, the researcher brings to light the underlying epistemology and methodology of historicism that penetrated the Middle East and South Asia in the nineteenth-century. Ringer also draws attention not to presume European modernities are *true* than others (p.10) because of this interaction.

Authentically termed by Ringer “historical empathy” is a remarkable concept since the notion includes reconstruction and imagination of the foreign contexts with an emotional proximity and connective, intrinsic effects. The author also draws attention to understand each culture on its own terms because of the connected and interconnected reason. The researcher emphasizes the context of empathy and its role in social life as “Vision and experience created the capacity for empathy – the immersion of ‘Self’ in a foreign context – and thus provided an enhanced perception of the ‘Others’ context.” (p.12).

Intention of making clear the ways how Islamic modernism thinking conceptualized and translated Islam into modernism to make progress and civilize is another significance in this book. Extending the concept of translation, the author remarks the necessity of the view of the *Tanzimat* (Re-organization) and other modernizing reform processes more generally, not as hybrid adaptations of western forms to local conditions, but as translations from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ (p.35). The DNA of a culture is the notion of essence. Nevertheless, the principal factors of the essence are language and religion. Ringer categorizes language as the intellectual and creative possibility, religion as the intellectual and moral capacity.

Tatar Muslim scholar, Ataullah Bayezidof; Turkish journalist and political activist, Namık Kemal; Indian Muslim political leader, Syed Ameer Ali; peripatetic journalist and pan-Islamist, Jamal al-din al-Afghani are four prominent intellectuals and Islamic modernists mentioned in this book with their notable and diverse conversations with their short and illuminating biographies. The commonalities of these four intellectuals composed arguments to Ernest Renan’s, a well-known nineteenth-century French philologists and Orientalists, ‘Religion and Science’ lecture.

The book is composed of well-organized four chapters in addition to the parts of introduction and conclusion, a bibliography, and an index that is why the study could be described as comprehensible and reader friendly. The introduction chapter is also divided into following subheadings: “Modernity as Disenchantment”, “The Landscape of Historicism”, “Historicism and the Challenge to

Religion”, “A New Age of Discovery”, “Thinking Beyond Europe”, “The Historiography of Erasure”, “Towards a New Methodology: ‘Conversation’ and ‘Translation’”. Other chapters are arranged thematically, around a series of questions and approaches related to the issue of historicizing and modernizing Islam. In the first chapter “Locating Islam” the researcher explores Islamic modernists’ ‘location’ of Islam in this universal, phenomenological, and civilizational taxonomy. Second chapter “Islam in History, Islamic History” includes the studies of Islam in history, rewriting Islamic history as the story of transcendent Islamic essence in a sequence of historical contexts. For the historical explanation and reason of progress, Islamic modernists explore the path of the ‘torch of civilization’. Following chapter “The Islamic Origins of Modernity” is in the pursuit of empirical proof that Islamic essence in historical context and investigates the solution to the reason of why the Islamic world was ‘backward’ compared to the European great powers. The next chapter “The Quest for the Historical Prophet” explores the Prophet’s character, sensibilities, and dispositions to illustrate the Islamic modernist’s vision of modern Islam since the essence of Islam is in the Quran and the Prophet. “Conclusion: God’s Intent – The Re-enchantment of the Sacred in the Age of History” outlines the contours of ‘modern Islam’ and the ‘modern’ understanding of the nature of religion resulted from the transformation of the relationship between God and human being’s consciousness with critical evaluation. The effective usage of metaphors throughout the study also enables to the readers greater understanding such as ‘Hansel and Gretel’s trail of breadcrumbs’ for retrieval of original, ‘pure’ words from their historical distortions step by step and ‘rabbit hole’ for the historian, through empathy, could be transported to a different context via various practices.

The book is particularly interesting for those interested in the interaction between religion and the quintessence of modernity in multiple aspects of Islamic modernism of nineteenth-century and the Ottoman world and conceptualizing the relationship between Western and non-Western modernities. The phrases, questions, quotations from various intellectuals awakens the mind of the thought with raising the awareness for additional questionings. From my point of view, the readers will find the approaches complementary with its clarity to understand the nature and spirit of the nineteenth century along with the previous and the following centuries and with its valuable contribution to the field.

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