

Reflections on Political Islam: Concepts and Contexts

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) participated in the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Atlanta, GA, held November 21-24, 2015. In addition to the participation of staff and associates in several meeting events and panels, IIIT maintained a book booth in the Exhibit Hall, co-organized a panel on “Opportunities and Challenges of Teaching Islamic Studies in Theological Seminaries,” and held its second annual AAR Reception and Special Lecture.

Offering a tribute to Ismail al-Faruqi (d. 1986), IIIT co-founder and co-founder of the AAR’s “Study of Islam” section, Abubaker Alshingieti (executive director, IIIT) and Ermin Sinanović (director of research, IIIT) expressed great pride in rekindling a stronger IIIT presence at the AAR by reviving the historical link established by al-Faruqi. Fittingly, John Esposito (Georgetown University), al-Faruqi’s first doctoral advisee, delivered the keynote speech: “Reflections on Political Islam: Concepts and Contexts.”

An intellectual giant in his own right, Esposito presented a historical analysis of the rise of political Islam movements during the latter half of the twentieth century through his individual interactions, appointments, and presence in spaces of influence at critical times. His keynote speech served both as an intellectual analysis as well as a personal journey, full of spontaneously sprinkled firsthand stories and narratives from private conversations. He emphasized the critical need to avoid ahistoric analyses of such movements and to resist symptomatic treatments that have become a popular approach by western governments blind to their own roles in such undesired behaviors and violence.

Referring to challenges like ISIS and youth radicalization, Esposito stated that “unless you understand the context within which political Islam arose...: who were the players, what were the issues for these movements, and also what their interactions were with government, you can’t understand why we continue to screw up today.” Making specific reference to recent government initiatives on Countering Violent Extremism that are youth-centric and target the great role religion occupies in people’s lives, he reminded the audience that discounting a history of oppression by western-backed authoritarian regimes is a myopic perspective to the rise of radicalism.

His speech spanned over fifty years of political history and American involvement in Muslim-majority nations with an emphasis on the Iranian

Revolution onward. During that time, he would fly into the DC area from Boston as a consultant for the State Department. Flying into Baltimore (as opposed to Washington's Reagan airport) paid off, he said. "Invariably, the cab drivers you would get were Iranian generals who had fled the country, and they were a gold mine of not only information on Iran, so you could show up [to the State Department] and look really knowledgeable, but they would say things like, 'I was in the class with Anwar Sadat when the U.S. trained us to do x.'" He shared these stories to show that history often repeats itself, and yet we react as if current events are peculiar. If an equal value is not placed on Muslim life, he argued, we should not be surprised to witness radical behavior.

His experience with various disciplinary groups like the AAR can be traced back to the Iranian Revolution. In fact, he argued, it was not until that moment that the academy started to take a notable interest in the study of Islam. After that event, he saw grant resources open, jobs surface, and a subsequent response made by the disciplinary groups.

Throughout his lecture, Esposito referenced an array of meetings he had attended with government officials, panels he had sat on at academic conferences, and talks he had delivered. He ultimately expressed a strong concern with the deep state and concluded that while authoritarian regimes are strong, western regimes are stronger.

Following his talk, Esposito engaged several audience members in an energetic question and answer session and signed copies of his new book, *Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring* (Oxford University Press: 2015), co-authored with Tamara Sonn and John Voll. During his richly decorated career, Esposito authored and co-authored over forty-five books on wide-ranging topics, including Islam, law, gender, politics, and globalization. His work has been translated into more than thirty-five languages. A past president of both AAR and MESA (the Middle East Studies Association), he currently holds the position of Professor of Religion and International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University (Washington, DC).

Well-attended with over fifty participants, many reception attendees networked and mingled over refreshments before and after the lecture. At the reception, Alshingieti announced that following the suggestion of Esposito, beginning next year, IIIT will confer an annual Best Dissertation in Islamic Studies award.

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