The clash that never was: debating Islam, the myth of civilisations and the realities of democracy

A review of Benhabib, S. and Kaul, V. (eds.) *Towards New Democratic Imaginaries – Istanbul Seminars on Islam, Culture and Politics* (Springer: 2017)

Albena Azmanova[1]

'Philosophers Bridge the Bosporus' – this was the formula of the annual gatherings of scholars and public intellectuals that came to be known as the Istanbul Seminars. This phrase expressed both the modus operandi and the spirit that animated the week-long meetings that took place every spring in Istanbul's Bilgi University for almost a decade from 2008 to 2016. This was an initiative of *Reset-Dialogues on Civilizations (Reset DOC)*, an association created to foster a path beyond political, cultural, linguistic and religious borders by hosting 'close encounters across all divides' -- as its founding directors, Nina zu Fürstenberg and Giancarlo Bosetti put it at the seminars' inauguration.

The Istanbul Seminars were in fact conceived in New York, at a meeting in 2006 at which half a dozen thinkers were looking for a formula for a collective 'life of the mind' potent enough to generate a paradigm alternative to the 'clash of civilizations'.[2] Seyla Benhabib proposed the city of Istanbul, and Nilüfer Göle later suggested Bilgi University. At the time Turkey was facing a historical reckoning as the forces of liberal republicanism, religious fundamentalism, autocratic liberalism (the Turkish army's stance), and democratic traditionalism were all fighting to shape the future of the country. Turkey was a laboratory of political innovation – a perfect place to observe history in the making and even take part in the experimentation by bringing together Turkey's intellectual and political elite (people of diverse political stances such as Cengiz Aktar, Asaf Savas Akat, Soli Ozel, and Ibrahim Kalin) to debate the road ahead. The timing of the seminars in late May and early June was chosen deliberately in order to allow students to attend. Indeed, the involvement of students not only from Istanbul's universities but also from academic institutions around the world became one of the seminars most valuable features.

Under the intellectual leadership of Seyla Benhabib as Chair of the Scientific Committee of Reset-DOC, and Volker Kaul as scientific coordinator of the Seminars, these annual gatherings became an intellectual powerhouse with international reputation.[3] Zygmunt Bauman, Nilüfer Göle, Alain Touraine and Sadiq Jalal al-Azm

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[1] Albena Azmanova has been a regular participant of the Istanbul Seminars and is currently member of the Advisory Board of Reset DOC.

[2] The meeting's attendees were Michael Walzer, Nadia Urbinati, Andrew Arato, Jean Cohen, Seyla Benhabib, Nina zu Fürstenberg and Giancarlo Bosetti.

[3] Asaf Savaş Akat, Seyla Benhabib, Giancarlo Bosetti, Alessandro Ferrara, Abdou Filali-Ansary, Nina zu Fürstenberg, Nilüfer Göle, Ferda Keskin, David Rasmussen and Nadia Urbinati have been

debated migration, identities and inclusive pluralism in 2010; Rajeev Bhargava, Anthony Appiah, Charles Taylor, Claus Offe, and Zaid Eyadat discussed the dynamics of resentment in 2011 -- to mention just two of those encounters. The meetings produced over 150 interventions most of which were published in special issues of the journal *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. This collection offers a selection representative of the full spectrum of the discussions: from philosophical battles for the meanings of individual and collective freedom to historical accounts of struggles for justice and projects of progressive politics.

The search for new democratic imaginaries, which the title of the volume invokes, discloses the over-arching premise of the conversations -- the available, familiar formulas of decent politics have exhausted their progressive potential. We are in a rather uncomfortable predicament. On one hand, the 'end of history' has dawned for democracy: even some of the most autocratic regimes of our times (in Erdogan's Turkey, Putin's Russia, Ali Khamenei's Iran) purport to espouse its values and adopt its procedures. On the other hand, democracy's time of triumph this is not: even the most liberal of our societies are beset by xenophobia, allegedly for the sake of protecting liberal democracy from its enemies, as the leaders of far-right parties charge, nominating Islam's traditionalism as the most lethal of threats.

Within the same historical conjuncture, "contemporary Islam is in a state of agony," in the words of Fred Dallmayr's contribution to this volume. This agony is triggered by the search Muslim societies have undertaken for a political formula alternative to the secular autocracies and autocratic theocracies they have so far experienced. Yet, this very search has triggered Islam's entanglement with power, which damages religious faith: "The yoking together of power and religion inevitably exacts a heavy toll both on the sobriety of political judgment and on the integrity of religious faith" (ibid).

This collection brings together some of the most sagacious voices on Islam and democracy with one goal -- to articulate new imaginaries able to solve the simultaneous crises of democracy and of Islam, of politics and religion.

The reader will not find a single prescription – what this volume supplies is the most extensive menu of ingredients for critical analysis: from historical accounts of state-building in the modern Middle East (Lisa Anderson), of the transformation of Kemalism in Turkey (Borovali/Boyraz), or of the relationship between religion and state power in Muslim societies (Nader Hashemi) to comparative analyses of historical cases of national liberation and religious revival (Michael Walzer) and policies of diversity and integration (Charles Taylor). The intellectual approaches range from philosophy of history (in Faisal Devji's inquiry into the anomalies of geopolitics after the end of the Cold War), to normative and textual analysis of Islam (Khaled Abou El Fadl), and a historicist reconstruction of the notion of a 'West' (Appiah). The analytical perspectives span from hermeneutics (Nasr Abu-Zayd, Abdelmajid Charfi, and Asma Barlas), and what Nouzha Guessous names a 'cultural deconstruction-reconstruction', to philosophical reflection (David Rasmussen, Alessandro Ferrara, El Fadl) and deeply contextualised practice-based investigations

members of the Executive Committee of The Istanbul Seminars. Murat Borovali has been instrumental in making Bilgi University home of the seminars.

(in Irfan Ahmad's plea for the primacy of the 'praxiological over the normative-textual').

A wealth of explanatory factors compete for validity – from the geopolitics of European colonialism and post-colonial policy (Anderson, Devji, Bilgrami, Ahmad), theological considerations of the nature of Islam and of religious commitments in general (Abu-Zayd, Charfi, El Fadl), as well as notions of moral and political agency (Göle, Bilgrami, Ahmad), to the very rhetoric of political action -- the interpretive accounts that frame the rationale of policies (Taylor). The more practically-inclined readers are treated to specific proposals for constitutional change (Dallmayr's project for transforming Iran's religious Council of Guardians into an upper legislative chamber), institutional innovations (Bilgrami's proposal for intra-community democratization), and experiments (Ayelet Shachar's model of 'regulated interaction' between state authorities and religious courts).

If the plentiful supply of approaches and elements of analysis is one of the volume's incontestable strengths, the second one is that it puts conflicting minds in dialogue. Asma Barlas opposes liberalising interpretations of the Qur'an (as represented by Abu Zayd in this volume) with a claim that the secular projects in 'Muslim societies are a form of self-harm'. Michael Walzer asserts that there is no hope for liberal democracy in the Muslim world today because a democratic revolution and religious revival are incompatible. This negative diagnosis stirs objections from many directions. It is countered by Nader Hashemi's observations, based on extensive survey data, that large majorities in contemporary Muslim societies hold democracy and Islam to be equally essential. Claims that the nature of political Islam renders it hostile to democracy on grounds of religion's commitment to absolute truth are opposed by observations that Islam, and more generally collective identities, turn belligerent only when freedom and democracy are restrained (Göle, Keyman, Borovali/Boyraz, Örs).

In turn, we are cautioned against the full endorsement of identity politics: Keyman's account of the changing nature of 'the Kurdish question' in Turkey sheds welcome light on the slippery slope of essentializing ethnic or religious identities and making them an object of politics. Most acutely, the thesis of the incompatibility of Islam and democracy is countered by arguments that Muslims, as free agents, are not only able to accept democracy, but are morally required to do so (Bilgrami). The clash of positions is particularly acute on the issue of gender equality and multiculturalism. Susan Moller Okin's assertion that multiculturalism is bad for women is countered by Nouzha Guessous's, Asma Barlas and Ayelet Shachar's claims that recognition of religious difference is a precondition for gender equality.

Despite, or rather through disagreement, these conflicting voices form an agonistic complicity in elaborating an alternative to the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, by whose verdict the political formula of (western) liberal democracy is incompatible with Islam. The search for new democratic imaginaries takes place along at least three trajectories.

One such path is to redefine the democratic republican order by bringing the public back into democracy. This idea emerges from a multitude of contributions addressing the politics of the coexistence of religion and secular government. According to the secularisation thesis about the genesis of modern liberal democracy in Western societies, the political aspirations of confining religious beliefs and attendant particularistic identities were neutered by way of confining religion to the private sphere. This move ensured equal and inclusive citizenship for all members of

the national community irrespective of particular identities. Debunking the hegemony of this understanding of secularism (which is fashioned after the French model of republicanism), Alain Touraine reminds us there is no single paradigm of religion-state relations within Western liberal democracies. Moreover, religion and collective identity are important sources of a person's agency, autonomy and dignity (Göle, Keyman, Borovali/Boyraz, Örs), which means that democratic citizens cannot exercise their political agency if those sources are blocked. Islamic religious identity is a particularly hard case because it cannot be as easily privatised as Christian identities have been. This is so because, as Nilüfer Göle notes in her discussion of the 'minarets-mosques' debate, Muslims need to give a public expression of their personal faith through dress code, aesthetic forms, or architectural genres. She invites us to see Muslims' insistence on making their religion publicly visible not as a rejection of secular republicanism, but as an affirmation of their citizenship, their desire and their right to matter for society as Muslims. When Muslims affirm publicly their difference in terms of religious faith, they do not reject the notion of shared citizenship, but rather challenge the unfair terms of citizenship recognition. To this, we might add, they request a reformulation of the private/public distinction and the way that distinction defines democratic citizenship.

Emin Fuat Keyman and Nilüfer Göle denounce the formula of radical secularism on the grounds that its purported universalism has allowed certain dominant identities (e.g. French of European descent) to assume normativity; as the public space is thus identified with a pre-established national community, newcomers are condemned to marginalisation. This has been the affliction equally of the Kemalist reform and the rule of the AKP in Turkey, as Murat Borovali and Cemil Boyraz make it clear in their co-authored intervention, cautioning against any aggressively majoritarian understanding of democracy and the adherence to a monist political and ethical vision. The meaning of citizenship should not, therefore, be reduced to a legal and political membership in a nation-state. As Keyman puts it, 'calls for citizenship should be post-national, differential and constitutional'; identity-claims to citizenship rights should be made with an emphasis on the very practice of democracy. Only a post-nationalist, differential citizenship grounded in constitutional guarantees of equal rights, he asserts, can prevent religious and ethnic pluralism from turning into anti-democratic identity politics.

What would the fair terms of citizenship recognition be? If we are to accept "the inevitable multiplicity of worldviews and religions which late modernity has bequeathed us" (in Seyla Benhabib's wording), we need to admit that the facile solution of the French model of republicanism that purges the public sphere from any trace of particularistic identities is no longer an option. An alternative formula is available -- that of American republicanism, in which a secular state "both prohibits the public 'establishment' of religion and encourages the 'free exercise' of faith" in the public sphere (Dallmayr). This version of secularism avoids both the overt 'politicisation' and the restrictive 'privatisation' of faith; it steers clear of both the radical separation and the radical fusion of religion and politics (Ibid). Equally importantly, this model allows for a diverse public sphere and active civil society to energise the democratic renewal.

Against now fashionable negative diagnoses of the European context, Nilüfer Göle traces the formation of a vibrant European public sphere – one that thrives through visual culture and performative practices, as well as politics of humour and subversion, and also celebrates visibility (e.g. the wearing of religious

attire in public, building of religious edifices). This creates a form of agency 'that is radically disruptive, provocative and mutually transformative". To this İlay Romain Örs adds her analysis of urban protest (on the example of the mobilization in defence of Istanbul's Gezi park and Taksim Square) and its power to radicalise democracy by re-constituting the public spirit from the pluralism of personal engagements. She reminds us that democracy is not just about rule by the public, but about having the public decide how it is to be ruled – a decision that requires a consideration of different democratic orders in the imagery of the citizens and of the rulers.

The refutation of militant secularism and the need to give voice to religious identities in the public sphere are two ideas that find robust support in this volume. But what of the impact of such identities on politics? What should the place of Islam be in the making of binding norms and the adjudication of conflict (the key functions of political rule)? To open the possibility to consider the place of religion in politics, Irfan Ahmad assails the commonplace assumption that popular sovereignty and the sovereignty of God are mutually exclusive concepts by reminding us that in the U.S., references to divine sovereignty are made in the very affirmations of popular sovereignty (i.e. the inclusion of the phrase 'under God' in the pledge of allegiance to the U.S. and the motto 'In God we trust').

However, allowing Islam access to the seat of political authority (as per the agenda of political Islam) might not only be detrimental to pluralist democracy but also to the Muslim faith itself. As Abou El Fadl remarks, if the basic Islamic demand is that human beings submit themselves to God only, engaging Islam in the pursuit of political power is an abuse of Islam. As he puts it, "for Muslims to make a universal contribution mandates a move away from focusing on political struggles and functional opportunism." If Muslims are to remain faithful to 'the genuine meaning of Islam as a summons to freedom, justice and service to the God", they should steer away from the collusion of religion and power (Dallmayr). In this reading, Islam and liberal democracy are not just compatible, Islam needs liberal democracy. Withdrawing religion from the remit of political rule but allowing it a voice in the public sphere and presence in civil society are preconditions for religious faith to be accepted freely, rather than imposed by force, and thereby destroyed.

The second trajectory along which a new democratic imaginary emerges is recognizing the progressive role religion can play, and in particular of Islam's emancipatory kernel – from the key message it brings about justice, to its empowering of resistance against the adverse impact of Western interventions and Islam's history of countering abusive domestic powers.

Abou El Fadl notes that Islam's basic theological premise is one's responsibility to bear witness for God – a responsibility to remain alert against injustice concerning the whole of humanity, not just the Muslim community. This brings to the fore the duty for moral agency endogenous to Islam. Within the logic of this argument, Islam's fundamental truth makes it deliver the active citizenship that democracy demands. This truth consists of a call for "people to pursue ethical values such as justice, mercy, compassion, kindness, or faithfulness". The very capacity to comprehend the notion of justice contained in the message Muhammad was called on to transmit, means that Islam relies on an understanding that "as human beings, we are subject to the laws of humanity that are etched into our very being … laws of rational elements that allow us to have a shared language about justice, ethics, values, happiness, misery and beauty". Islam's truth is therefore a universal and

inclusionary one – a form of humanism that not only makes Islam compatible with democracy, but mandates its commitment to democracy as an inclusionary form of political organisation. Thus, Islam's kernel consists of those independent and universal moral principles which, akin to the role the Natural Law tradition played in early modern European history, impose limits on the arbitrary power of ruling elites.

In the same vein, Nader Hashemi reminds us that religion in the Muslim world limited autocracy and arbitrary rule, it 'managed to place restrictions on the personal whims and ambitions of the caliphs and sultans by forcing them to recognise religious limits to their rule". The Islamic judges (*muftis*) have often 'played a counter-balancing role in relation to the political powers, acting in favour of what might today be called the rule of law" (Charfi). Moreover, the demand for submitting to no one but God has a liberal potential -- one needs to have full control of oneself (to achieve complete agency) in order to be able to submit to God, and such complete control of oneself is impossible under autocratic rule (El Fadl).

As Irfan Ahmad remarks in an illuminating footnote, "if Muslims did not use the term 'democracy' this does not mean they lacked it." Since the Qur'an's message of revelation is about justice and moral progress, anchoring democracy and human rights in Islamic normativities is therefore entirely possible (Abou Zaid, El Fadl, Dellmayr, An-Na'im, Ahmad). As Nouza Guessous argues, women's groups in Morocco and Tunisia used Islamic law and texts to further their causes, using Islam's founding principles (the *Maqasid).* In tracing the shift in India's Islamist organisation Jamaat-e-Islami from opposing democracy to embracing it, Irfan Ahmad attributes this transformation to Islam's internal resources for democratization. Such internal resources are available not least due to a peculiarity of Islam – namely the discursive and argumentative manner in which God's core message about the need of reformation has been communicated to Muhammad, and further to the Muslim community (Abu Zayd).

In their respective narratives, Nader Hashemi, Akeel Bilgrami and Irfan Ahmad urge that we take into consideration the anti-democratic influence of Western powers on Muslim countries (e.g. through supporting Islamic militants and autocratic rulers as well as through attitudes of condescension) in order to see these societies' alleged aversion to democracy and the Islamic political militancy for what they actually are -- resistance to the nefarious political influence of the West and a quest for the agency of self-determination. Nader Hashemi invokes Islam's historical role in promoting social justice, pointing out that it has been continuously viewed by Muslims as an antidote to the 'despotism, dictatorship and human right abuses' that accompanied the imposition of secular regimes in the Middle East and Africa. In their various ways, the narratives lead the reader to the conclusion that Islam has powerful epistemic and normative resources for endorsing both liberalism and democracy as foundations of political rule.

A third trajectory in rethinking democracy takes us beyond the remit of political dynamics and into the socio-economic and cultural parameters of social existence. Works which explore the non-religious sources of the conflicts (Anderson, Devji) such as the legacy of European colonialism and the post-colonial state, suggest that finding a formula of mutual accommodation between Islam and democracy is not a matter of political reform, but of far-reaching social change. Muslim societies, Abdelmajid Charfi notes, are profoundly secularised; what appears as a return to religiosity is, on the hand, a matter of the search for certainty in a context of globalization, and on the other -- a reaction to historical backwardness, humiliation,

and to the despotism of the imposed secular regimes. Lisa Anderson invites us to see the success of Islamic movements as a matter of a failure of the post-colonial state – the societies of the MENA region might have been granted legal-political sovereignty, but they never achieved financial and economic self-sufficiency. Moreover, political elites were unable (and we might add, often unwilling) to provide for the welfare of their citizens. Thus, it is the disillusionment with existing public institutions and socio-economic policies that has triggered the rise of religious sentiments and particularistic affiliations.

In his discussion of the Kurdish question in Turkey, Fuat Keyman points out that the current battle of identity politics and the war with the Turkish state originated in the underdevelopment of the Kurdish region. In her account of the Gezi resistance against Erdogan's attempt to recast the city as a locus of capital accumulation and religious revival (by building a replica of Ottoman artillery barracks to house commercial ventures), İlay Romain Ors highlights the possible complicity between neoliberal capitalism and religious revival. Religiously motivated (but not generated) violence will cease once Muslim societies are allowed their proper political agency, as the international community politically reconstitutes the international order to enable it to effectively address planetary challenges such as climate change and food security (Devji).

This cluster of interventions reaches the conclusion that the socio-economic, ethno-political, and religious-cultural dimensions of social life intertwine. This means that the mutual accommodation of Islam and democracy cannot be tackled as a simple matter of erecting the political institutions of a secular liberal democracy. Our struggle for more inclusive and vibrant democracy would be futile without attention to all parameters enabling such a political edifice.

One of the most laudable achievements of the Istanbul Seminars was to put an end to the tiresome liberal-communitarian debate in (Western) political philosophy by sublimating the most important insights of this debate into a contextually grounded consideration of the merits of cosmopolitan and multicultural models of cultural pluralism. In this volume, the contributions of Kwame Anthony Appiah, Charles Taylor, AlaineTouraine, Abdullahi An-Na'im, David Rasmussen and Alessandro Ferrara present the full spectrum of positions and would be particularly valuable for students of political philosophy. At the same time, they challenge the basic assumptions in the liberal-communitarian debate – the essentialist fallacy which underlies the communitarian conception of cultures and religions as distinguishable and unchangeable entities (debunked by Appiah and Touraine), or the power of liberal individualism to secure inclusive democratic citizenship (debunked by Shachar and Barlas). Moving beyond the false dichotomies on which the old debate relied, we can raise the crucial question about enabling conditions: under what conditions can people, while valuing the collective identities that are meaningful to them, nevertheless acknowledge the moral choices of others (An-Na'im)?

The search for a plausible answer to this question demands a radical shift of ontology -- that is, in the way we perceive the nature of competing claims to justice. David Rasmussen charts the contours of such an alternative ontology in his proposal to see political contestation as a process in which comprehensive doctrines issue moral claims neither *against* each other (as communitarianism would see it) nor in reference to a neutral overarching reason (the liberal position), but in *relation* to each other. It is in this dialogical process of addressing claims to others that a common

domain of the political is perpetually emerging. This dynamic plasticity of the political is conceivable through the hermeneutic insight that no cultural horizon is ever fully closed – "any living language, any vocabulary, is intrinsically open" (Bernstein), as well as from a perspective of 'reflexive pluralism' which Alessandro Ferrara articulates, noting that each cultural tradition already contains values favouring pluralism.

One of the most seductive qualities all contributions to this volume share is their simple, dialogical delivery. They were conceived as public lectures and discussions, and the written versions often retain the wit, self-deprecating humility and sense of camaraderie in which they were originally presented.

The Istanbul Seminars went into exile in 2017. This was not just a symbolic gesture of protest against the hardening of the autocratic regime in Turkey. Many of the seminars' regular participants were actively engaged with the Academics for Peace movement and other forms of political opposition, thus risking persecution by the Turkish authorities. However, we are not looking for a permanent home: the hope, and the plan, is to return.