

The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought. By Andrew F. March Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. 328 pages. \$45.00 (hardcover).

Andrew March's new book is a philosophically rigorous attempt to engage some of the most important ideas that define the Sunni subtradition of contemporary Islamic political thought commonly referred to as "Islamism," a widely used label that is admittedly not without its problems. At the heart of Islamism, March argues, is the "comprehensive reformulation of Islamic political philosophy" that places human beings, qua God's vicegerents, at the centre of their political theology (p. xi). This Islamist conception of popular sovereignty reflects an adaptation of the Qur'anic idea of man's vicegerency (*khilāfa*) on the basis of which Islamist theorists bestow a kind of political agency upon every Muslim. Indeed, more than merely agency, such theorists view it as the responsibility of every Muslim to contribute to bringing about the realisation of God's will in the modern public sphere. In this work, which has been roughly a decade in the making, March's copious footnotes reflect a level of engagement with both premodern and modern Islamic political thought that is remarkably extensive in both its breadth and depth. March has read widely in writing this book, mining an extensive array of Arabic sources spanning over a millennium of Islamic intellectual history. The extensive use of the often neglected secondary literature written by contemporary Arab scholars is particularly impressive. The endnotes give the impression of a scholar who leaves no stone unturned in his exhaustive exploration of the carefully circumscribed philosophical inquiry he is engaged in. Our understanding of the intellectual foundations of contemporary Islamism, both its premodern inspiration and its modern innovations, have been illuminated in a way that generations of scholars will be grateful for.

The book is divided into seven chapters with the preface serving as an introduction. Chapter 1 presents a brief outline of Islamist political thought and the historical context in which it emerged. Chapter 2 presents the premodern Sunni conception of Islamic political theology as it has been received by the modern Sunni scholarly tradition. The remaining chapters focus on four specific Muslim political theorists, a move March justifies by pointing out that he is not engaged in an exhaustive exploration of modern Islamic political theology. Rather, he is tracing the genealogy of the notion of sovereignty through the writings of certain particularly influential Islamic scholar-activists. The scholars in question are undoubtedly influential and interesting, though in some cases, perhaps another author would have chosen different scholars. The four scholar-activists who garner the lion's share of March's close analytical reading are Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935; Chapter 3), Abū al-A'ālā Mawḍūdī (d. 1979; Chapter 4), Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966; Chapter 5), and Rāshid al-Ghannūshī (b. 1941; Chapters 6 and 7).

As March argues, each scholar contributes to the formation of contemporary Islamist thought, but not everyone is equal in their fashioning of the Islamist conception of popular sovereignty. Riḍā wrote at a time when popular sovereignty was not part of the Islamic

political theological lexicon. For him, the concern was not so much democracy—which he did not advocate—but an opposition to executive absolutism. By Mawdūdī’s time, things had changed. Popular sovereignty emerges as part of the discourse, but a highly problematic one. For Mawdūdī, the popular sovereignty that legitimated modern states was a case of the human arrogation of the exclusively divine right to legislate in any ultimate sense. Yet, March argues, Mawdūdī’s own discourse regarding every individual Muslim’s role as God’s vicegerent or caliph on earth leads to the empowerment of the Muslim populace, when appropriately pious, into a body that exercises “limited popular sovereignty under the suzerainty of God.” (p. 105)

Alongside Mawdudi’s expansive conception of human vicegerency, March reads Sayyid Quṭb as developing a notion that the Sharia is “the law we would give ourselves,” since it is so naturally aligned to human inclinations and needs. It is for Muslims, after all, a law laid down by the Creator for His creation. This further legitimates the idea that popular sovereignty for Muslims (when they have not been corrupted by outside influences, it is implied) could only give rise to a political sphere aligned to Sharia norms. Despite the explicit rejection of democracy along Western lines on the part of both of these scholar-activists, March argues that the groundwork they laid was foundational to the work of Ghannūshī, “the most famous theorist of the harmony of Islam and democracy.” (p. xxi) Yet Ghannūshī’s post-Arab revolutionary political practice and its attendant justifications illustrate for March that the “caliphate of man,” or the Islamist conception of popular sovereignty, may ultimately be an unattainable ideal in the modern world for a number of reasons laid out in the concluding chapter of the work. It is this chapter that I wish to engage most thoroughly in the remainder of this review—it is the least concerned with the analytical presentation of intellectual history and the most theoretically speculative and, for this reason, interesting, at least to the present reader. The impact of March’s assumptions on his conclusions appear most noticeable here.

Among the reasons March offers for the infeasibility of realising Islamist conceptions of popular sovereignty, two seem particularly noteworthy. He addresses the first under the heading “The Irreversible Moral Pluralism of Modernity.” (p. 221) This is a reference to the fact, as he sees it, that modern Muslim societies have become so morally diverse that Islamist conceptions of a state that accords with even only those aspects of the Sharia that are matters of unanimous agreement are no longer able to garner the unanimous consent of the governed. As March puts it:

because this Islamic democratic vision of self-rule involves a very deep kind of consensus about metaphysical truths and the ethical purposes of human life, it does not escape the possibility that such deep moral agreement is no longer likely in the contemporary world, at least without the kinds of coercion and limitation on

freedoms of conscience and speech that Islamic democrats claim to reject. What if moral pluralism is here to stay? (p. 223)

I think March, here, possibly underestimates the lengths to which humans are willing to interpret principles they uphold as being at the core of their identity in ways that might appear to contradict those very principles, especially in moments of perceived existential crisis. In this connection, we may consider liberalism after 9/11. As many scholars have observed, concerns about security, often out of proportion to the actual threat, have allowed for forms of coercion and limitations on fundamental freedoms, such as the right to privacy, vis-à-vis large swathes of liberal societies. Whether by virtue of secret mass surveillance programmes, or through what some European liberal politicians have referred to as “muscular liberalism” which appears to contravene notions of freedom of conscience, despite often glaring aporias, entire societies are often able to live quite comfortably with what some may view as contradiction. Charles Taylor has observed that liberalism’s implications have been gradually worked out over the centuries, allowing the extension of liberty to slaves and suffrage to women; and it continues today as liberalism extends similar rights to gay and transgender peoples. It is probable that a figure like John Locke (d. 1704) would have in his own day opposed all of these moves by the later liberal tradition, and rather called for the use of coercive force against their advocates as he does in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* with respect to atheists and Catholics. And he would not have considered such a stance aporetic.

The modern world and the states that make up the international order are also quite accustomed to forms of coercion. Indeed, the modern state is, if nothing else, an instrument of coercion, even if in the better established and more stable modern states, this is arguably subtle. But it would not take long for an individual who refuses to pay their taxes, or flouts government rules on the schooling of their children, before the state’s coercive force would manifest. Nor is it unusual for this coercive force to privilege liberal values at the expense of religious ones, notwithstanding concerns regarding freedom of conscience. In 2020, France and Austria exemplified this in relatively stark fashion through crafting anti-terror laws that systematically targeted their Muslim minorities in the name of security. The relatively extreme rhetoric of their securitization policies was exceptional, but the sentiments hardly so. Many such moves by modern states are couched in moral terms. France speaks of the liberation of Muslim women from wearing headscarves while in John Locke’s historical home, Britain, the state and influential voices in civil society speak of the necessity for Muslim schoolchildren to be taught that there is nothing unusual about gay couples.

The result, however, is that such liberal democracies collectively agree to interpret liberty as legitimately constrained when illiberal values are perceived as threatening a liberal moral consensus that is seen as essential to the integrity of their societies. Given the extensive

ethical justifications put forward for women's and gay rights in modern political philosophy, it is not clear to me that such beliefs do not also reflect "a very deep kind of consensus about metaphysical truths and the ethical purposes of human life." I use "metaphysical truth" in an unconventional sense here to refer to values that are not straightforwardly discernible on empirical grounds. For such societies, or at least, the politicians their majorities or pluralities elect, the question March asks of Islamists, "What if moral pluralism is here to stay?" is perhaps, at best, a dangerous distraction in a moment of existential crisis.

March's final reason for the infeasibility of Islamist conceptions of sovereignty seems similarly open to question. He notes that the concept of sovereignty was an idea that "Islamist thinkers not wrongly assumed was something modern conditions required them to have a version of," and yet, he argues, adopting this concept "forces Islamist political theory into [an] aporia." (p. 226f.) Either they can uphold divine sovereignty, or they can accept "the fact of reasonable moral pluralism," but they cannot have both. Reasonable moral pluralism, coupled with the notion of popular sovereignty, renders upholding divine sovereignty untenable in March's estimation. The framing is interesting here. Islamist thinkers were correct in recognising the necessity of sovereignty, but modern conceptions of popular sovereignty, entailing as they do the fact of reasonable moral pluralism, renders this enterprise of developing an Islamic conception of sovereignty that is closely aligned with premodern Islamic political theology doomed from the start. Modern conditions, it would seem, are simply not able to accommodate the Islamist desire to preserve the political dimension of the premodern Islamic tradition. In Chapter 2, March had offered a compelling portrait of the minimal premodern Sunni consensus regarding politics and governance. These included the centrality, indeed, the sovereignty of the Sharia, alongside a virtual consensus regarding the obligation of establishing the caliphal office. But modernity, he seems to argue, simply does not admit of such religio-political conceptions.

I feel that March's conclusions, careful as they are, remain too categorical, and are grounded on too narrow a conception of modernity. As suggested earlier, even the liberal tradition, whose conception of reasonable moral pluralism seems to be the yardstick March uses to set the limits of modernity, has shown itself in practice to struggle in response to the level of moral pluralism that exists in the modern world while preserving its notion of a well-ordered society. A second point, related to the foregoing, is to ask whether non-Western traditions have the right to reformulate ideas they borrow from the West in a time of Western ascendancy and global intellectual hegemony in ways that strike those of us schooled in Western traditions of political thought and sensibility as aporetic? March does not question that they do, but he does believe it is his right to question the cogency of these systems of thought albeit with great nuance and sensitivity, as exemplified by this work.

But I suspect other approaches to the analysis of Islamist thought may be more productive than the approach March adopts in the final chapter of his work. Taking our cue, for example, from Shmuel Eisenstadt's notion of "multiple modernities" alongside Dipesh Chakrabarty's exhortations that we provincialise Europe, we could recognise the Islamist conception of popular sovereignty as being an alternative paradigm, no less cogent in its own context than, say, liberalism in a post-Trumpian America consumed by the culture wars. This Islamism is naturally not a paradigm of social organisation that would appeal to March, just as his Rawlsian liberalism would not appeal to Islamists. The aporias that Islamist intellectuals would discern and write critically of, if they had the institutional resources of the modern academy that those of us in the West have access to, would likely be on a similar scale to those that careful Western political philosophers would see in Islamist thought. As a scholar trained both in the Western academy as well as an Islamic seminary, this seems obvious to me.

None of these comments on the last half of the last chapter of March's book is to in any way underplay the significance of his masterful contribution to our understanding of modern Islamist thought and the way in which it has sought to adapt premodern Islamic political theology on the question of sovereignty to modern conditions. As a work of intellectual history, there is no better treatment of the topic out there, and given the sheer extent of March's mining of the primary sources, this nuanced and carefully researched study will continue to be an invaluable resource for both scholars and lay readers many years into the future. It offers a vista into a tradition of thought that most readers of the English language will likely have never been exposed to, but which represents the ideas of a religious tradition that is adhered to by nearly two billion people around the world today. I thus hope it will be read very widely by scholars, students and anyone interested in religion, politics and modern Islamic thought.