The book’s strength lies in its broad view of political contexts where images are seen and circulated in various ways, and this approach opens new perspectives for further research on visual culture and image politics, not only in the Middle East. Studying such a vast array of political and spatial contexts is invariably reliant, however, on a broad definition of what constitutes an image. Khatib’s examples of image politics cover political rallies, the wearing of symbolic signs by demonstrators, as well as billboards, murals, museum displays, caricatures and television broadcasts, and this often renders distinctions between acts, performances, images and mediations impossible. The nature of the images addressed in Khatib’s study evolves in the course of the book, although this is not explicitly discussed: in the first part, images are mainly associated with the visual outcome of deliberately producing and spreading particular political messages; in the second part, focused on the Arab Spring, images are identified more in the creative production of reflexive and ironic pictures. This difference perceived here in the visual dimension of the Arab Spring offers fresh potential to formulate efficient concepts and refine theories of the image.

Khatib’s major contribution lies in presenting a variety of visibilities, images and gazes that have changed the political landscape in the Middle East. The illustrations in the book play their part in this variety. Most of these entirely black-and-white pictures show billboards, murals, photographs and rallies within the broader frame of the street, space or interior where they have been placed, thereby featuring the social contexts in which images are perceived. In this book, Khatib suggests a range of conceptions and interpretations of the political role of images that raise important questions and contribute to shaping an analytical framework for visual studies. The book invites further research into the different ways in which ‘politics in the Middle East is now seen’ and also into different modes of intervening in the aesthetic conditions for seeing political change.

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In the second half of the twentieth century, violent expressions of religious fanaticism led some intellectuals to attribute the causes of such violence to an intrinsic incapacity in Islam to recognize and adapt to the challenges of the modern world. Safdar Ahmad argues against this position by presenting the cases of Muslims that have attempted to reform their society through the application of Islamic principles. In his opinion, Muslim reformers represent the Islamic way to modernity, which should not be associated with European intellectual thought and be defined by such concepts as the contraposition of science and reason with religion and superstition.
The book is divided into seven chapters and covers the Muslim reformers’ debates from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In the first chapter, Safdar explains how the introduction of newly developed technologies in the Egyptian and Indian colonies impacted Muslims’ ideas about science and posed a problem regarding the reliability of revelation. Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh and Sayyd Ahmad Khan, reacting against the ‘ulama’ position that considered the two fields incompatible, were committed to demonstrating that Islam encourages the application of reason and welcomes the development of science.

In the second chapter, Safdar presents the cases of Muslim reformers in the Indian context. The author analyses how the Aligarh movement first disconnected Urdu from abstract themes characteristic of the aristocracy and then started to employ it to describe the rising middle class. This process represents a fundamental moment for the formation of the Muslim national identity in India.

In the third chapter, Safdar points out how industrialization and urbanization affected women and their role in the Muslim society. According to Qasim Amin and Ashraf’Ali Thanawi, it was necessary to free women from the traditional constrains of the rural society and recognize their contribution in the modern society. Although these reformers have the merit of triggering the debate over women’s issues, the author points out that, in practice, they limited women’s autonomy.

Chapter Four focuses on the contribution of Muhammad Iqbal and his efforts to reconcile the universality of the Islamic message and Muslim identity with the limits imposed by race and state. Notwithstanding the ways in which his thought has been later interpreted, the author claims that Iqbal not only didn’t have a fixed national ideology, but also that his idea of race contrasted with his philosophy.

Chapter Five deals with Maududi and his rejection of secularism that is considered contrary to the essence of Islam, understood as a comprehensive system whose acceptance is the only way to fulfil God’s will. Maududi also contributed to the reinterpretation, according to the historical context, of the Qur’anic terminology, such as jahiliyya which was applied for the first time to the West that refuses to embrace Islam. Maududi’s interpretation of Islam also enriches the debate about women through their idealization in the society (Chapter Six). According to Maududi the exclusively domestic position of women is a consequence of their nature that makes them inadequate to fulfil social and political responsibilities. Jamila, a US citizen who converted to Islam, also embraced Maududi’s position and rejected the Western model of women’s emancipation. Maududi’s interpretation of women in the society and Jamila’s case represent an opportunity for Safdar to argue against the Western notion of femininity which considers only anti-patriarchal forms of feminism. In his opinion, in fact, support of patriarchal society can be the result of a conscious and informed choice.

The last chapter focuses on the more progressive branch of Islamic reformism, in particular those developments in the hermeneutics of the Qur’an which depart
from the traditional view. Some of these progressive interpreters, in particular Fazur Rahman and Amina Wudud, ask for a distinction between the universality of the Islamic message and the specific context in which it was revealed. From a political point of view, 'Abdolkarim Soroush claimed that only secularism can guarantee the respect of intellectual pluralism, since human knowledge is fallible. Mohammed Arkoun points out that Islam needs to be connected to Judaism and Christianity with which it shares the importance attributed to the sacred texts, the cultural background and the tensions between concepts such as faith and unbelief, soul and body, essence and existence and reason and revelation.

Safdar’s analysis provides an overview of the particular Muslim response to the challenges of modernity and its essential characteristics in relation to Western interpretations of modernity. The book can be approached both chronologically and thematically. In tracing the evolution of Islamic reformism as it developed in the last two centuries, it focuses mainly on some specific topics such as education, politics and gender issues. The political issues have been analysed according to both Maududi’s ideological interpretation and the most progressive form of secularism as formulated by 'Abdolkarim Soroush.

The analysis of Islamic reformism aims also to challenge the idea that only Western values can be associated with modernity and to highlight the limits of these interpretations of modernity. This is particularly evident in the case of feminism, which in Western debates only takes the form of resistance to the patriarchal society. According to Safdar, however, alternative women’s experiences are possible and they are the result of a conscious and informed choice. This is the case, for example, of Amina Wudud who supports the idea that Islamic principles can be reconciled with women’s rights.

One limit to Safdar’s analysis is the association of the dichotomy between reason and revelation to European thought, considering this dichotomy an external and imported concept. On the other hand, the association between religion and superstition and the need to differentiate them from reason and science is evident in Islamic thought since the beginning of Islam.

This possible alternative interpretation of the essence of modernity, however, does not compromise the value of the book, which succeeds in presenting the multiplicity of debates among Muslims and their contribution to the renewal of their societies, rejecting the static ideas that emerge from Fukuyama’s interpretation of Islam as a modern form of fascism. It also provides an effective critique of some of the most dominant Western views in matters pertinent to modernity.

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