

## Reviews of books

### The spectre of Hasan al-Turabi and political Islam in Sudan

W. J. Berridge, *Hasan al-Turabi: Islamist politics and democracy in Sudan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £75 – 978 1 107 18099 4). 2017, 349 pp.

Steve Howard, *Modern Muslims: a Sudan memoir*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press (pb US\$26.95 – 978 0 8214 2231 1). 2016, 217 pp.

Noah Salomon, *For the Love of the Prophet: an ethnography of Sudan's Islamic State*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (pb US\$29.95 – 978 0 691 16515 8). 2016, 242 pp.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 brought the concept of political Islam to the attention of the West. Ever since then, social scientists have struggled to define political Islam, and, more recently, the Islamic State. Were these new concepts, post-colonial legacies that suddenly emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a challenge to liberal democratic order? Or were Muslims simply speaking on the international stage in the languages and vernaculars that they had always used, but for the first time Western audiences were finally forced to hear their thoughts? Writing of his fieldwork in Sudan during the early 1980s, the sociologist Steve Howard depicts himself as confronting a familiar quandary for a visiting American. He reflects on his sense of wonder that ‘this poor African society could produce these advanced religious thinkers’ (p. 58). How should we understand Sudan’s religious thinkers, men such as Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, Hasan al-Turabi and the functionaries and ideologues of the Islamic Salvation Regime that came to power in 1989?

Part of what has bedevilled social scientists when writing about political Islam or the Islamic State has been a curious desire to dissect these terms as if politics as an ideal type could be separated from Islam, or, even more troubling, as Noah Salomon points out in his insightful introduction, the fruitlessness of Wael Hallaq’s assertion in *The Impossible State* that Islam and the modern state are irreconcilable (Salomon, pp. 22–3). All three of the books under discussion dispense early on with ideal types of Islam – the state or the political – and get into the often messy if generative history of the men and women who have spent their lives debating what it means to be Sudanese and Muslim.

During the final quarter of the twentieth century, perhaps no one was more synonymous with Sudanese Islam than Hasan al-Turabi, and his presence or absence in the three books discussed here becomes an acute lens through which to see how the authors tackle the meaning of political Islam and the Islamic State. W. J. Berridge’s thorough and informed recent biography of Hasan al-Turabi is an obvious place to begin. Berridge starts by addressing the mystery of al-Turabi; was he a brilliant liberal reformer of Islam or an Islamic extremist all too willing to condone violence and authoritarianism? Part of the difficulty in answering this question clearly relates to the tendency of analysts to attempt to divide Islamists into reformers and radicals – or, in the words of Mahmood Mamdani,

'good' Muslims and 'bad' Muslims. Berridge relies on Youssef Choueiri's dichotomy between Islamic 'reformism' and 'radicalism'. For Choueiri, "Islamic Reformism" and "Islamic Radicalism" are epochal as well as qualitative terms'. Reformism extending from the nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century preceded Islamic radicalism as the epoch in which we currently find ourselves. Reformism meant the reinterpretation of Islamic concepts and the appropriation of European intellectual traditions. Choueiri, however, posited that 'Islamic Radicalism is a politico-cultural movement that postulates a qualitative contradiction between western civilization and the religion of Islam' (Berridge, p. 13). Al-Turabi, of course, crosses these boundaries. Instead of focusing on al-Turabi the intellectual, the image that emerges from Berridge's careful reconstruction of his life from Sudanese newspaper sources is al-Turabi the master of the Sudanese political sphere. While words were his weapon of choice, by the end of Berridge's reconstruction of his career the reader is left with the overwhelming impression that al-Turabi is not remembered because he offered a developed and systematic philosophy, but because he was able to stay at the centre of debates about what it meant to be Sudanese and Muslim and thus remained politically relevant until the very end of his life. Unfortunately, Berridge's pragmatic decision to divide his book in half, splitting the narrative of al-Turabi's political career from discussions of al-Turabi's views on various vexing questions of Islamic political thought, paradoxically makes it harder for the reader to understand exactly what it was about al-Turabi's capacious intellect that enthralled his global audience for decades.

Hasan al-Turabi makes a jarring appearance in Steve Howard's *Modern Muslims* after being generally absent from the story of the Republican Brothers, a leading Islamic revival movement in Sudan largely contemporaneous with Hasan al-Turabi's Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Turabi makes his sole appearance in Howard's work near the end when it is mentioned that 'Al-Turabi was thought to have influenced President Nimeiry's decision to execute Mahmoud Mohamed Taha in 1985' (p. 165). Before that, Howard makes it clear that what differentiated the Republican Brothers from al-Turabi's Muslim Brothers was that the Republican Brothers did not believe that violence and compulsion could be used to perfect an Islamic society in Sudan. Reading Howard's work, it becomes clear that the Islamic State in Sudan was not founded in 1989, but rather that politics in Sudan was Islamic for the entire twentieth century, and that many of the ideas that are frequently attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan were commonly debated by educated Sudanese. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha championed a particularly controversial interpretation in his justly famous work *The Second Message of Islam*. In this work, *Ustadh* Mahmoud argued that there was a difference between the revelations that came to the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and those that came in Medina. *Ustadh* Mahmoud argued that the suras revealed in Medina were specific to the time of strife, while those revealed in Mecca were timeless. Through Howard's ethnographic experience and his membership in the relatively small Republican Brothers, he demonstrates that 'it was obvious to me that a secular society was not evolving in Muslim Sudan as may have been expected after decolonization. The dominant and complete presence of Islam in everyday life was a remarkable part of my education in Sudan' (p. 168).

Howard's account is an excellent tool for undergraduate teaching. It goes a long way in detaching mid-twentieth-century Islamic revival movements, often referred to by the term 'political Islam', from their characterization as inherently violent. Instead, Howard demonstrates the intellectual vigour exposed by dedicated Muslims trying to argue for the intellectual coherence and applicability of their

faith in a world they believed to be epistemologically dominated by Western rationalism.

Noah Salomon's *For Love of the Prophet* analyses Sudan through the lens of the anthropology of Islam, in the process making clear that politics in modern Sudan has always been refracted through Islam. This approach allows Salomon to make what for many scholars of Sudan might be one of his most surprising claims: that the ruling National Congress Party did not give up its efforts to Islamize Sudanese society with the ousting of Hasan al-Turabi from power in 1999. In particular, and building on the earlier work of Mark Massoud, Salomon argues that by 2005, with the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement between the regime in Khartoum and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army, many of the functions of the state had been captured by the humanitarian understanding of international governance organizations. Yet, even as Salomon says that he was unable to find a programme of Islamic state building in the familiar halls of the Ministry of Education, he writes that when he 'took out [his] virtual earplugs ... the presence of the Islamic state, so elusive in those government offices, came blaring to the surface'. Locating his object of study, Salomon continues: 'the Sudanese soundscape was staffed with notes of this elusive state' (p. 3). In Chapter 4, 'The country that prays upon the Prophet the most: the aesthetic formation of the Islamic State', which is likely to be one of the chapters frequently assigned on syllabi, Salomon tells the story of how al-Kawthar, a radio station friendly to the government, frequently played popified *madih* (Islamic praise poetry) in order to transform the Sudanese state into a subject that 'seemed absent in my visits to the ministries, but on my bus rides across town I nevertheless seemed to find it everywhere' (p. 4).

Another surprising point made by Salomon is that, even as 'the regime made Islam the primary source of political legitimacy, it paradoxically opened itself up to endless challenge' (p. 5). The Islamic Movement in Sudan, at whose head Hasan al-Turabi would become world-renowned, was not able to monopolize authority, a point brought home by al-Turabi's almost complete absence from Howard's *Modern Muslims*. Salomon explains the contested nature of Islamic authority in Sudan even as he convincingly demonstrates the ways in which Islam became a pervasive discourse of politics in an excellent vignette about al-Turabi. Beginning in Chapter 5, Salomon tells the revealing story of an encounter between al-Turabi and a prominent Sufi, Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahim Muhammad Waqi' Allah. During the mid-1990s, according to the story, several travellers from Khartoum arrived at the Sheikh's compound and the news that they conveyed led the Sheikh to have a dream which he interpreted as commanding him to travel to Khartoum in order to tell al-Turabi to change his policies or else risk leading Sudan to ruin. Apocryphally, al-Turabi asked the venerated Sheikh if his *wudu* or ritual ablutions were valid when he had his dream. Flabbergasted, the Sheikh got up to leave, but for several days, until al-Turabi pleaded for the Sheikh to forgive him and accepted his policy suggestions, he was unable to hold his own *wudu*. Salomon narrates: 'He had accused al-Bura'i of not being a good Muslim and thus having no legitimate basis for political critique. Yet now al-Turabi, the man meant to be guiding Sudan to an Islamic future, was himself unable to perform those same basic ritual functions' (p. 169). Salomon reports that this story was frequently told to him when he asked his interlocutors about Islamic politics. It was meant to suggest that Islamic politics was not the sole preserve of the intellectual elite and that those who used Islam as a cudgel against critique would be punished.

All three books reinforce the idea that the search for an Islamic State was not new to Sudan in the years after 1989. Thus, it is not wise to predict that Islam

will soon cease to be one of the principal discourses through which politics in Sudan is practised. Rather, politics will continue to be dominated by questions of what it means to be Sudanese and Muslim even as the Sudanese continue to craft new political orders. Together, the three books demonstrate that conventional narratives about the global rise of political Islam during the 1970s will not suffice. Throughout the twentieth century, Sudanese politics was thoroughly Islamic. The development of political and intellectual thought in the country was not marked by contestation between poles of Islamist and secular politicians and intellectuals, but rather was shaped by various interpretations of Islam and its place in public life. The fact that the main drama in Islamic revivalist movements has centred around attempts to create a state, to organize politics and to instil piety in societies of believers begs the question of whether the phrase ‘political Islam’ provides the nuance necessary to study the wide variety of intellectual projects the term is often used to encapsulate. In place of ‘political Islam’, one wonders whether scholars should instead be attempting to use the variety of terms that Muslim thinkers themselves have used to categorize their thoughts.

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## Islam and the Nigeria quandary: history, politics and reform

Brandon Kendhammer, *Muslims Talking Politics: framing Islam, democracy, and law in northern Nigeria*. Chicago IL: Chicago University Press (hb US\$95 – 978 0226 36898 6; pb US\$32.50 – 978 0 226 36903 7). 2016, 312 pp.

Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, preaching, and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £67.99 – 978 1 107 15743 9; pb £25.99 – 978 1 316 61019 0). 2016, 300 pp.

Olufemi Vaughan, *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*. Durham NC: Duke University Press (hb US\$99.95 – 978 0 8223 6206 7; pb US\$25.95 – 978 0 8223 6227 2). 2016, 336 pp.

Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-century Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (pb £29.99 – 978 1 4744 3219 1). 2016, 540 pp.

Despite immense oil wealth and astounding human potential, the Nigerian project has stalled. There are Nigerians – probably many more than one may suppose – who passionately want to *achieve* their country, to create a patriotic home and a stable political settlement that would allow them to use their wealth to fructify their potential, but regional division has so far been insuperable. Nigeria’s own founding fathers were grimly ironic about this struggle. Nigerian unity, quipped Tafawa Balewa, the country’s first premier, was ‘only a British intention’; another grandee of the time, Obafemi Awolowo, said the name ‘Nigeria’ was ‘merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not’; while the contemporaneous paramount northern leader, Ahmadu Bello, dismissed the Nigerian project as ‘the mistake of 1914’, in reference to the half-baked British ‘amalgamation’ of northern and