

carved out post-independence political power in Lebanon between them to the detriment of other communities including the Shi'i. Weiss' argument helps to break certain myths regarding Shi'i passivity or indifference to the Lebanese state during the mandate period.

With respect to the organization of the book, it is not a long or difficult read – a prologue, epilogue and six chapters over 236 pages, and also includes a pre-mandate historical account of the Shi'i community in its traditional geographical homeland Jabal 'Amil. The book is, however, designed for the specialist in Lebanese history/

politics, although the wider community of historians and social scientists who are interested in 1) the relationship between the colonial power and the colonized, and 2) the complex processes involved in the formation of identity including sectarian identity, would also benefit from this study. We are, after all, seeing a resurgence of latent communal identities throughout the Arab world, and are entering a period of strong sectarian tensions, so a book that provides some context for understanding sectarianism is a welcome read.

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Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence

By *Steven Fish*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 385 pages, ISBN 9780199769209.

Are Muslims Distinctive? is an exceptionally objective book that examines the highly subjective and controversial issue of Muslim 'exceptionalism.' Steven Fish employs numerical (mostly survey) data and statistical methods in analyzing whether and to what extent Muslim-majority societies are distinct from the rest of the world. His references to Indonesia, where he recently resided, enrich the book. Examining numerous socio-political issues, the book reveals that on some issues Muslim-majority societies are not different from others (e.g., personal piety and the relations between religion and politics), on some others they are better (e.g., socioeconomic inequality and homicide), while on others they are in worse conditions (e.g., terrorism, gender inequality, and democracy).

This is a very well written book, in which the author explores each issue by documenting the data, summarizing alternative explanations, and then analyzing both. One particularly thought-provoking aspect of the book is its brief discussions on religious texts. The author's ability to discuss the Qur'an and the *hadith* in comparison to the Bible is very impressive. On some issues, such as homosexuality, Fish elaborates that different views of Muslims (less favorable) and Christians are based on their various interpretations of essentially not so different religious texts. For example, he notes, "We would expect much higher support for the justifiability of divorce among Muslims than among Christians if holy writ determined opinion. Yet, Muslims exhibit less tolerance for divorce than Christians" (p. 108). The author's textual comparisons

and his emphasis on the diverse interpretations of religious sources prevent the book from being trapped by the essentialist depiction of Muslim attitudes as simple and unchangeable results of texts.

Another way of relatively limiting overgeneralizations on Muslims (as if they constitute a monolithic body worldwide) is the Durkheimian notion of society that Fish employs, but infrequently emphasizes: “society has a life of its own that is distinct from the individuals who compose it” (p. 260). Thus, a society may promote certain perspectives by cross-cutting religious affiliations: “As we saw when analyzing individuals’ responses on whether men should receive preference in employment when jobs are scarce, living in a country with a proportionally larger Muslim population substantially boosted the predicted probability of respondents *across faith groups* agreeing that men should receive preferential treatment” (261; emphasis original). I found this out in my own research—Muslims’ weekly religious attendance exactly reflects the national average ratio of church attendance in France (10%) and the United States (40%).

Weekly religious attendance is an issue where Fish finds Muslims only minimally different from Christians. This result seems to depend on controlling the data with socio-economic factors, and more importantly the low ratio of Muslim women: “56 percent of Muslim men attend religious services weekly compared to 29 percent of Muslim women. Thirty-three percent of Christian men attend religious services weekly compared to 40 percent of Christian women” (p. 35). In many Muslim-majority countries women do not attend mosques on Fridays but still pray at home; therefore this data may present them less religious than they actually are. A more

counterintuitive result of Fish’s analysis is that Muslims are not more favorable to mixing religious leadership and political authority than the rest of the world: “while conventional thinking (among Muslims and non-Muslims alike) holds that Muslims are particularly inclined to regard the separation of religious and political authority as illegitimate, we did not find support for this idea” (p. 258).

Muslims, on average, appear to have lower rates of socioeconomic inequality and homicide. To explain the former, Fish emphasizes the importance of specifically prescribed *zakat* (annual almsgiving) in Islam. He also compares Muslim-majority societies with Christian-majority societies, where some evangelicals, especially in the United States, have promoted the “prosperity gospel,” which implies that “material wealth is God’s way of blessing people” (p. 223). Fish notes the possible links between lower socioeconomic inequality and homicide rates since socioeconomic equality is correlated with social integration, which may limit homicides (p. 130).

On mass political violence, Fish reveals that Muslims are neither better nor worse than non-Muslims. Yet, on the issue of terrorism, he finds out that “Islamists were responsible for 125 of 204...of the high-casualty terrorist bombings that took place between late 1994 and late 2008” (p. 151). Even if “we focus exclusively on attacks on civilians, Islamists were responsible for 74 of 136...of the incidents” (p. 152). According to Fish, Islamic texts should not be blamed for that. He compares the Old Testament with the Quran: “In terms of prolixity, gory detail, ferocity, and divine enthusiasm for the slaughter of innocents, the Qur’an contains nothing analogous to the account in Joshua 10-11” (p. 163). Instead, Fish tries to make sense of the connection between

terrorism and some Muslims through the global balance of power; he spends about four pages for a hypothetical scenario in which Muslims allied with China replace the West in terms of dominating the world, which may lead some Christians to commit, or at least not condemn, terrorism (pp. 166-9).

I have two reservations about this counterfactual scenario. First, it does not explain why Muslims are the major victims of terrorism. In the same chapter Fish notes, "Fifteen of the twenty-five countries in which Islamists committed terrorist bombings are predominantly Muslim. Seventy-seven of the 125 attacks...were carried out in these lands.... [I]f we exclude the attack of September 11, 2001...most of the victims of Islamist attacks have been Muslims" (p. 155). Second, Fish depends too much on Indonesia in terms of both a) the lack of sufficient condemnation of 9/11 by Muslim political leaders and b) a public survey in 2003 in which 58 percent of Indonesians expressed "a lot of confidence" or "some confidence" for "Osama bin Laden to do the right thing regarding world affairs" (p. 157). Later, Fish acknowledges that "[m]ost Muslims may oppose terrorism and regard it as incompatible with their religion" (p. 258); but still argues that "political leaders in Muslim countries find advantage in backing, or at least not strongly condemning, Islamist terrorism" (p. 163) without sufficient data.

On the issue of patriarchy, the book shows that Muslims have a much higher percentage of expressing opinions that favor men over women on occupational and educational opportunities. It stresses the exceptionally higher gender gaps in income, literacy, and political positions in Muslim societies. Gender inequality is a deep problem that all societies, especially Muslim-

majority societies, should take seriously. Yet, one variable Fish employs—the level of healthy life expectation—makes me extra curious, because providing "inferior health care" for females (p. 203) is much worse than patriarchy. Fish notes that females in Muslim countries have a substantially smaller healthy life expectancy advantage than they do in Christian countries—the average difference between female healthy life expectancy minus male healthy life expectancy in the 20 most populated Muslim countries is 1.6 years, whereas in the 20 most populated Christian countries (excluding Russia) it is 4.2 years (p. 199). I have three concerns about this particular data. First, if we take this data as explaining gender inequality, we should accept that Saudi Arabia (3.1) and Iran (3.0) are more egalitarian toward women than Indonesia (1.5) and Turkey (1.6) (p. 198). Second, when I combined Muslim and Christian countries based on Fish's data, geographical differences seemed to be more important than religious differences. The average ratios of South Asian (-2.0) and Sub-Saharan African (1.8) countries are much lower than the Post-Soviet countries (7.7). Fish also stresses the exceptionally high ratios in the Post-Soviet cases. Last but not least, Fish employs World Health Organization (WHO)'s data on healthy life expectancy. The WHO has various reports in its website. When I use the most updated (2009) data on life expectancy (which is probably not adjusted on health criteria), I found the average of the same 20 Muslim countries as 4.0 and that of same eighteen Christian countries as 5.1 (excluding Russia [12] and Ukraine [12]) <http://apps.who.int/ghodata/?vid=710>.

Fish does not criticize Islam in general for gender inequality; instead, he holds particular interpretations of Islamic law

(*fiqh*) accountable. He cites Muslims who interpret Islam in a more sexually egalitarian way and stresses, “The prophet mixed with women other than his wives openly and regularly. He heeded women’s requests and even obeyed their orders (p. 207).” Fish quotes some *hadiths* to elaborate this issue: “a woman was mentally ill. Once she came to the Holy Prophet S.A.W. and said: Verily I have got some work to be done by you. The Holy Prophet S.A.W. said: ‘O Mother of so and so! Tell me where you want me to go with you and I will finish your work.’ Then the Holy Prophet S.A.W. went with her and completed the work she gave to him” (quoted on p. 207). Fish again makes some comparisons: “parts of the Bible and the Qur’an address topics regarding women in parallel, and the Qur’an’s injunctions are sometimes more liberal, in the contemporary sense, than their counterparts in the Bible” (p. 208). He explains it with quotations from the New Testament such as the following: “Paul states:...‘If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off....A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man’ (1 Cor. 11:6-7)” (p. 209).

On democracy, this book concurs with the idea of the “Muslim gap.” The book challenges the thesis promoted by Alfred Stepan that the democracy deficit exists in Arab but not in non-Arab Muslim countries. It uses the Voice and Accountability scores of Kauffman et. al. while calculating the average scores of Arab (30.2), non-Arab Muslim (34.6), and non-Muslim (51.9) countries (p. 248). Another finding of Fish that counters some earlier publications is that Muslims do not express a higher ratio of pro-democratic views in World Value Surveys; instead he finds even a lower ratio—but not a statistically significant one:

“being a Muslim has no meaningful substantive effect on attitudes toward democracy” (p. 245). As a critic of Fish’s earlier article on Islam and democracy, I welcome his statement in this book: “I used other indicators of female status and did not find a stable relationship between them and political openness. This finding represents a departure from an article I published in 2002, in which I argued that predominantly Muslim countries may suffer a shortage of open politics due in part to disparities between the genders (p. 239).” Instead, Fish now takes some alternative variables more seriously: “Relatively low levels of economic development and high endowments of hydrocarbons...may explain part of the correlation between Muslims and authoritarianism” (p. 249). Given his expertise on democracy, I would expect the author to provide a much deeper analysis on this issue, particularly on the relationship between the rentier states and authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries.

Fish’s book is an original, significant, and timely contribution to a broad range of disciplines, such as comparative politics, political sociology, and Islamic studies, as well as particular research agendas on religion and politics, religion and gender, and religion and conflict resolution. It should also be taught to graduate students for its exemplary research design, rigorous methods, and intellectual depth. It breaks several prejudices around the so-called Muslim ‘exceptionalism,’ which not only promoted Islamophobia in the West but also provided justification to authoritarian regimes in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Thus, this is a rare book that serves both scholarly and moral purposes.

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