

Book Review: Islamic Globalization: Pilgrimage, Capitalism, Democracy and Diplomacy

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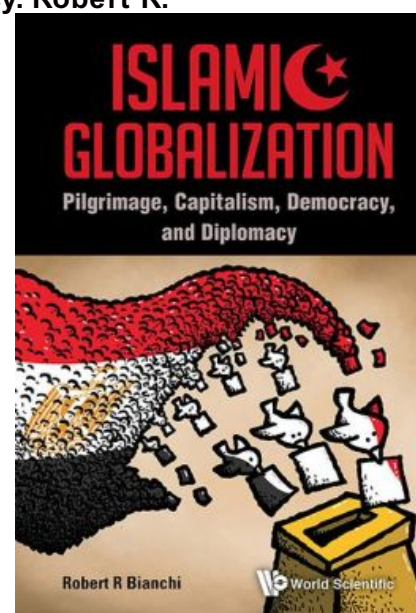
*This book examines an emerging pattern of Islamic globalization as a series of transformations in four interrelated areas – pilgrimage and religious travel, capitalism and Islamic finance, democracy and Islamic modernism, and diplomacy and great power politics. A valuable read for researchers and journalists, writes **Elaine Housby**, providing new insights into the rapidly growing ties between China and the Islamic world.*



Islamic Globalization: Pilgrimage, Capitalism, Democracy and Diplomacy. Robert R. Bianchi. World Scientific. September 2013.

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[Robert R. Bianchi](#) is a political scientist at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore, and thus regards the Islamic world from the other side of the Pacific to that where the dominant narrative of the Middle East has been constructed. Much of the material in this book feels fresh and unfamiliar. It is a collection of articles which have been previously published elsewhere in a variety of journals and in several cases in encyclopaedias. They are all well-written, accessible and fairly short, and so this volume is a valuable resource for readers with limited time, particularly undergraduates and journalists. For researchers wishing to pursue specific topics in more depth, the references and bibliography are excellent.



Bianchi is critical of the established schools of 'area studies' in Western universities for ossifying regional specialisations he regards as entirely outdated. He is also critical of the assumption within older forms of modernisation theory that religion will simply wither away in modernity because it is incompatible with it – a view now thoroughly discredited within religious studies but still lingering on among some policy makers. This book constitutes an unusually wide-ranging survey of the many forces that are now creating Islamic modernity.

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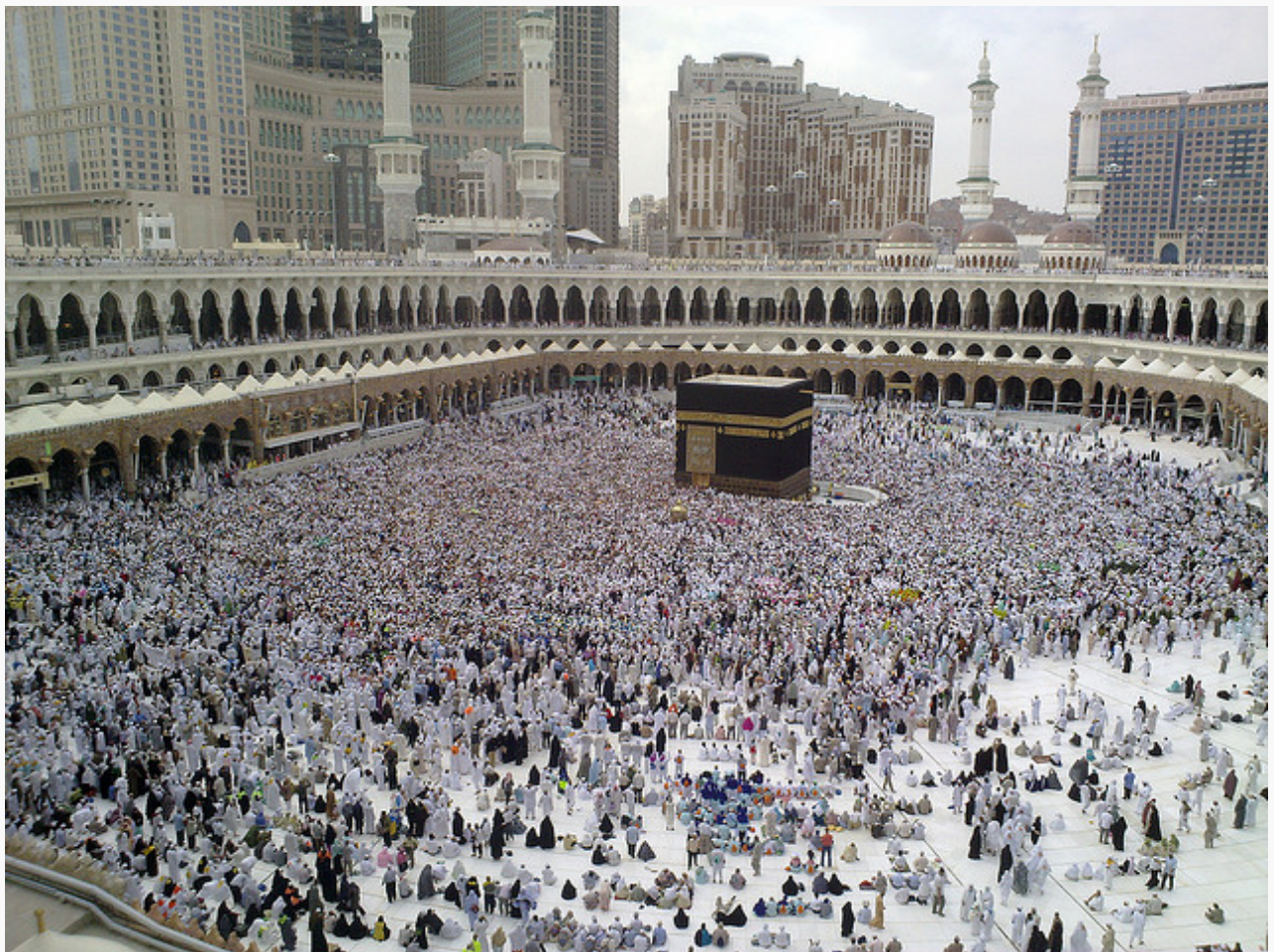
A recurrent theme of the book is that the majority of Muslims are found in Southeast Asia and that their Islam is a more flexible and adaptive force than the oil-backed Wahhabism of the Gulf. (Bianchi always calls it the Persian Gulf, a term loathed by those on the Arabian side of it and seemingly used here as a statement of the author's Eurasian sympathies.) These non-Arab Muslims resent being told that their opinions are too liberal or their own customary expressions of faith unacceptably non-orthodox.

The first section of the book, 'pilgrimage', comprises several papers about the hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. This is a form of globalisation intrinsic to Islam; one of the pillars of the faith is itself an expression of the global nature of the *ummah*, the faith community. The hajj is a radical statement of the equality of all believers before God, regardless of ethnicity, nationality and social class. It has enormous symbolic power which the governments of Muslim states constantly strive to harness for their benefit rather than risking its capacity to discredit them.

The second section, 'capitalism', is about the Islamic finance industry. Bianchi correctly characterises this not as an anachronistic survival but as a distinctive form of Islamic modernity, a mutual adaptation of the global banking industry and religious tradition. He sees the financial services business as one of the best placed to liaise between Muslim communities and contemporary globalised culture and institutional structures, bringing Muslim majority societies into the global economy in a constructive and creative way. He fully acknowledges the problems with Islamic banking in its present state, notably the failure of some players in the industry to conform even with the regulatory standards of the secular world, let alone with Islam's own ethical ideals, but is optimistic that it can progress beyond them and help to create better financial services for everyone.

The third section of this collection brings together under the heading of 'democracy' two long and highly detailed papers analysing voting patterns in the recent elections in Egypt and Tunisia respectively and several shorter pieces about some prominent theorists of Islamic democracy and the position of religious law in contemporary societies. It contains much to interest legal theorists and political sociologists.

The



A last day of Hajj, Mecca 2009. Credit: [Al Jazeera English](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

fourth section, entitled 'diplomacy and great power politics', considers the position of the lands of Islam in contemporary world politics, with special reference to China. This topic appears to be the author's particular passion. The first paper is called 'Morsy in Beijing' and even though the Egyptian president's personal role has been overtaken by events, the symbolism of his choosing to visit China still holds. Egypt is anxious to cultivate good relations with China in order to avoid continued financial dependence on the United States, and China sees Egypt as a major regional power whose goodwill it needs to ensure access to key energy and food resources.

Bianchi argues that China's policy towards the Islamic world is dictated purely by its own self-interest, without any cultural Islamophobia being allowed to distort its foreign policy in the way he believes has happened in the United States. In this he sees China as acting in the true spirit of its mercantilist past, when it gained influence by trade and not by conquest.

China sees the Islamic world in the same way as the latter sees itself, not as a newly emergent region but as a great civilisation and former world power that was temporarily kept down by colonialism. For this reason the political leaders and business classes of the Muslim world often prefer alliances with China and other non-Western countries to those with American or European states they feel will never treat them as equals. Bianchi suggests, therefore, that the U.S. in particular may eventually pay a heavy economic and geopolitical price for its arrogant attitudes towards and aggressive treatment of Muslims.

As part of its policy of cultivating good relations with Islam, the Chinese state offers generous subsidies to members of its own very large Muslim communities who wish to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. This survey of Islamic globalisation has thus come full circle and returned to the hajj as the most important symbol of a faith community that is truly transnational in its origins, its influence and its ambitions.

Bianchi has written a short concluding chapter to summarise the combined message of the pieces collected in this volume. The United States, China and the Islamic world all contain progressive thinkers who value our modern world civilisation as a joint creation of all the peoples of the world and seek to move beyond their own culture's engrained sense of its superiority to form new partnerships based on common interests. Supporting these globalising modernisers should be our priority. The alternative of continuing to interfere in and destabilise the Muslim world for supposed superpower advantage is too dangerous to contemplate.

Elaine Housby has a Masters degree in Politics and Sociology from Birkbeck College, London, a Masters degree in Modern Middle East Studies from St Anthony's College, Oxford and a PhD from the Open University for a thesis in the field of Religious Studies. She is the author of *Islamic Financial Services in the UK* and *Islamic and Ethical Finance in the UK*, both published by Edinburgh University Press. [Read more reviews by Elaine.](#)

