

Mohammed A. Bamyeh (2019) *Lifeworlds of Islam. The Pragmatics of a Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press. x + 240pp.

ISBN (hardcover) 9780190280567

Bryan S. Turner Australian Catholic University

*Lifeworlds of Islam* is a book we academics all wish we had written – intelligent, informative, challenging. He starts by pointing out that world attention on Islam has unfortunately been shaped by three cataclysms: the Iranian Revolution, the September attacks of 2001 and the Arab Spring of 2011. These events largely caught observers by surprise in a context where the sociology of Islam was underdeveloped. In this controversial context, Bamyeh's overall aim, which is successful, has been to steer a course between essentializing Islam (by presenting it as a system whose meaning appears independent of human activity) and developing an apologia for Islam as invariably compatible with human rights, democracy, women's rights, liberalism and so forth. In other words, the challenge is to avoid advocacy.

The book consists essentially of three separate essays that are framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion. The first essay is 'Islam as a social movement' in which he compares the Muslim Brotherhood, *Hizb al-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation) and 'Jihadism' (*Da'esh* involving a combination of local wars and global youth cultures). The second is 'Islam as Public Philosophy' in which he, following Armando Salvatore, examines how Islam has to be justified and debated in the public sphere. He identifies two competing variants of this issue. The instrumental approach treats Islam as a solution to modern problems, while in the hermeneutic approach Islam gives meaning to the world. While modern Islamic movements have often entered into democratic contests, they have more commonly promoted the growth of an 'ethics of social participation' (p.23) while remaining independent of state institutions. The most successful movements have been about participation rather than democracy as narrowly understood. The third chapter is on 'Islam as a global order' in which he argues that historically global Islam operated under three principles of partial control, free movement and cultural heteroglossia. While every serious student of Islam is aware of its diversity. For Bamyeh this diversity needs no celebration since it is 'an unavoidable sociological fact, produced by life itself, everywhere and at all times' (p.179). Heteroglossia, from the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, describes an order rather than a unity. No ideology, religious or otherwise, 'that hopes to become universal could escape heteroglossia' (p.180). Over time *Dar al-Islam* developed its own conceptions of global citizenship, its notion of sovereign historical continuity and systems of knowledge that were disseminated via its own networks that ultimately depended on its lifeworlds, namely its embeddedness in experiences of the everyday. Perhaps the thrust of all three essays centres not on whether Islam can be 'rescued' from some malady (tradition, misogyny, fundamentalism), but rather whether we postmodern bourgeois liberals (to employ Richard Rorty's categorisation) 'could learn something from the historical features of Islam as the organizing language of an older global system' (p.199).

The three essays or components are held together by a master concept ('lifeworld') and a single objective. Three spheres of practice (social movement, public philosophy, and global orientation) are the lifeworlds of an ideology or the everyday pragmatics that sustain Islam across different times and places. The idea of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) was first developed by Husserl and Schutz to explore the subject experience of the everyday phenomenal world. Bamyeh takes his departure however from Habermas rather than from Schutz to explore the contrast between structures of power and

the lifeworld. The religious world is about experience not beliefs or doctrine. The long term survival of any religion is dependent its lifeworld through which it can tackle new not ancient problems. These three essays therefore also constitute an original criticism of the all-pervasive view in mainstream sociology of the global secularization of society. His challenge to the secularization thesis rests on the explanatory capacity of his central concept of lifeworld as everyday experience. One criticism of Bamyeh however would be that his notion of lifeworld remains somewhat disembodied, namely that the lifeworld has to be grounded ultimately in the habitus, following Pierre Bourdieu, or the world of corporality. The religious experience is ultimately grounded in our corporeal habitus rather than in a set of official beliefs. Religions survive not by support from authoritarian systems of power, but as a consequence of everyday experience in the lifeworld. The single objective is to understand how any religion can survive over a long period of history – indeed over centuries. In the long run, religious survival depends on the creativity of its lifeworld. A religion must depend on its persuasive power over against authoritarian systems of power. A discourse that enjoys persuasive capacity is able to address all social groups and classes in such a way that permits every social segment to understand the discourse to be an intimate expression of its own lifeworld.

*Lifeworlds of Islam* is a book that is brimming with ideas which collectively challenge many of the misleading or false interpretations of Islam. I touch upon two corrections of popular misinterpretations of Islam. Firstly, Bamyeh's entire argument leads us to a conception of a 'living religion', which is further underscored in the conclusion. Thus, 'Islam is simply what Muslims do. A living religion dies out when it is no longer useful in our lives or when other discourses provide meanings for our lives that are more beneficial than religious ideas or finally when its "only remaining tool" is coercion' (p.205) indicating that its 'persuasive capacity' is exhausted. The second example is his treatment of *shari'a* – notice the lower case. It cannot be understood as law. Its proper definition is that 'it is the sum total of practical ways of being a Muslim in the world' (p.142). He draws attention to three primary characteristics of *shari'a*. It has never been a uniform collection of rules. The four surviving Sunni schools accept the multiplicity of *shari'a* traditions. It often involves contradictory advice from different judgments (*fatwa*). It does not describe state functions. That was the work of *siyasa*. These ideas are predominately ones that originate with Bamyeh himself, and perhaps in passing one striking feature of the book is the absence of detailed discussions of other modern or at least recent intellectuals. The limited exceptions are Abdolkarim Soroush, Ali-Shariati, and Saba Mahmood.

In many respects, the Conclusion is both more challenging and more interesting, because it is in these concluding passages that we hear Bamyeh speaking to us as readers of his own lifeworld for example when he asks, regarding ethical behaviour, as to whether God – Bamyeh invariably has a lower case god - should be feared or loved. Paradoxically god must be feared because we cannot be trusted with an ethical system whose origin is not feared. However, god's love for humanity is infinite, but he is also the lord of eternal damnation. How can these be reconciled? 'Until god himself answers this question, we are left with sociology' (p.211). To my mind, this conclusion is a powerful vindication of the sociological calling.