

Modern Things on Trial: Islam's Global and Material Reformation in the Age of Riḍā, 1865–1935. By Leor Halevi. Columbia University Press, 2019. 384 pages. \$75.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback), \$29.99 (e-book).

Leor Halevi's *Modern Things on Trial* is a worthy exploration of Muslim moral and ethical practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as viewed through the prism of a select number of scholarly opinions, called *fatwas*. The fatwas were issued by Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, a Syrian émigré to Egypt who is counted among an influential group of traditionally trained Muslim reformers of this time. His supporters state that Riḍā perpetuated reform through fatwas, whereas critics point to how he hobbled reform. Halevi aims to accomplish the challenging task to show how, as the subtitle reads, "Islam's global and material reformation" was forged by the scholarly pen and political activities of Riḍā, a figure broadly viewed as part of a moderate Salafist orientation in modern Islam.

Scholars continue to unravel the complex reasons behind the religious discourses known as modern Islamic reform. Polarizing debates now riddle this scholarly field. Islam has a self-equipped propensity for adaptation as a revealed faith, some argue, provided the task of change was undertaken by authentic and pious scholars. For others, Islamic reform is nothing but a capitulation to colonial modernity or subservience to the machinations of hegemonic powers, which they deem as a poorly advised venture. Halevi does not enter this fraught territory, but some of these polemics hover over Riḍā's fatwas related to "modern things." Islamic reform, Halevi admits, is a complicated story since binaries and dichotomies are unhelpful, although he does not always succeed in avoiding these pitfalls himself.

How does Halevi's study differ from other studies on Riḍā and Islamic reform? "Islam's reformation," he writes, "was not an ideational movement rooted in modern concepts; it was a materialist movement rooted in modern objects" (262). With this presumption at the center of his book, the author elucidates different themes, in eight chapters, as to how Riḍā was a crucial figure whose teachings shaped the sensibilities of modern Muslim subjects and how he nurtured their tastes by approving the consumption of goods and practices on a global scale. So, when cultural changes foisted the use of toilet paper on Muslims, they were bound to seek ethical clarification whether it was permissible to use it since paper was a departure from their practice. A question involving the lawfulness of paper money instead of metals is among the many other practices treated in this book. In all these altered practices spawned by the ethos of capitalism and modernity, Muslims solicited ethical guidance in the form of fatwas. For instance, Riḍā fields questions from Egypt, but also from Indonesia to India and from Singapore to Russia, about whether Muslims ought to support commerce in their own countries instead of buying foreign products. Can they indulge in the purchase of lottery tickets? What is the status of a gramophone that produces music, a leisure activity that is prohibited in the view of some Muslim religious

authorities? Does music taint the device, or can the same instrument be used to listen to melodious recitations of the Qurʾān? Halevi extracts his data from a trove of 1,060 fatwas sent to some 430 petitioners between 1903 and 1935, of which two-fifths came from Egypt and the rest from overseas. Riḍā was by all accounts a global mufti before the age of social media.

The labor-intensive and helpful historical sketches and material histories are commendable. Halevi mines shipping records to know the amount of goods that passed through the various ports in Riḍā's surround that might have exposed him to the globalization of commodities and the flow of technologies into Muslim lands through foreign commerce. However, the reader is not entirely sure how the empirical data connect to the practices that are being examined. Halevi does not fully map the symbolic, ritual, and metaphysical meanings of Muslim practices, for example, the ablution rituals he studies. When the material history speaks inadequately to the social history, then some of the practices and questions in the fatwas come off as anachronistic if not comical, such as when a British steamship's captain prohibited Sudanese sailors from carrying water to the latrines and imposed on them the use of toilet paper. In doing so, they are prevented from using water and other materials to remove particles of defecation from the body. One agitated sailor sought a fatwa from Riḍā as to whether using the "modern thing" was "against religion" (42).

Halevi in many instances is irked by Riḍā's legal reasoning and rhetoric, as in the case when the mufti's affirmation of toilet paper makes our author wonder whether the mufti is "a modernizer or a medievalizer" (42) since he analogized toilet paper with the traditional use of stones or mud pellets, as was and remains the custom in some places. To be fair, Halevi does question whether a "materialist reading of the fatwa" makes one disregard the "symbolic argument" in the case of toilet paper replacing another practice. Riḍā, he explains, compared the "scriptural emblem" of ablution to a "modern thing" like toilet paper and was thus able to incorporate the commodity into modern Muslim practice. In my view, the old symbolic reasoning and the logics of new practice are not thoroughly excavated by the author to demonstrate the material reformation in the case of toilet paper as well as other topics treated in the book. In the removal of impurities from the body, early Muslim tradition prohibits one from using things that are of *use* to humans and animals, such as bones, or things of *value* to humans. The ubiquity of paper in an age of technological modernity undermines an ancient respect for paper, which was a means of preserving and transmitting knowledge and sacred texts. With the use of newsprint and other mundane uses of paper, this commodity is now valorized differently and requires a new ethical narrative for Muslims.

Halevi is disappointed with Riḍā's reasoning in this instance for never referring to toilet paper as a "European" product, as the Sudanese sailor insisted. Instead, he focused on the hygienic aspects of the modern commodity. Riḍā is often cast as an enabler of a "laissez-faire Islam" perfectly compatible with modern European civilization. It is unclear whether Riḍā's impulse to find compatibility of Islamic law within the practices of European civilization is due to an inferiority complex on the part of reformers such as himself. But Halevi categorizes Riḍā's

fatwas as “capitalistic commodities” and “laissez-faire Salafism” that minimized the religious and legal barriers to facilitate individual prosperity and communal welfare, which in turn cast Islam as a “prosperity gospel” (62, 127, 254).

Halevi distills the working theory underlying Riḍā’s reasoning, one to which many other past and contemporary traditionalists also subscribe. Traditionalists and neo-traditionalist scholars often claim that Islam’s “ancient requirements and prohibitions” are sufficient for all times. Required were interpreters who grasped the divinely ingrained intentions of the law. This mechanistic logic portrayed Islam as an “easy, convenient religion” (43), meaning that its foundational legal hermeneutics avoided any form of hardship. Halevi cites Wael Hallaq, a trenchant critic of Riḍā who accused the latter of dissociating mundane matters from religion. Halevi defends Riḍā against Hallaq’s criticism, arguing that the mufti’s program was more complicated since he had to grapple with entanglements of fixed religious norms in rapidly changing social conditions. Here was an opportunity to explore whether Muslim jurists of Riḍā’s generation were also partly legal and moral pragmatists, a feature that Halevi neither entertains nor explores.

However, Halevi helps readers detect the flaw in the rhetoric popularized by figures like Riḍā when the latter loudly announces that Islam is a “total system of judgments” (44). This rhetoric gives a sense of fixity and rigidity to the law, but one is then surprised how often Riḍā finds interpretative exits from constricting rules. Not all of Islam is as easy as Riḍā claims, for surely fasting in the month of Ramadan in the summers of the northern hemisphere is onerous. Yet, it becomes clear from this study that muftis not only adjudicate the “sacred law” to cover new commodities or practices but also often negotiate past traditions and practices of a non-scriptural provenance and then replace or update these aspects of lived and, shall we say, material religion. However, to do so, they take recourse to scriptural arguments in a bid to render change discursively possible or palatable, whether it is toilet paper, paper currency, or the use of a gramophone.

One wishes that Halevi was inclusive in his sources since some of these issues on technology and Islamic law have already been examined. This study could have profited from debates about the role of technology, tools, machines, and commodities in human development. Halevi’s claim that Islam’s reformation was not rooted in concepts but rather in material objects sounds deterministic and is open to challenge. Karl Marx’s declaration that material instruments of production centrally directed human development and Teilhard de Chardin’s pessimism of how technological rationalism will result in a lifeless and loveless organized intelligence both overlook the longer story of human beings, as Lewis Mumford pointed out. Humans also possess a symbolic capacity where animal propensities combine with emergent cultural entities, and thus a deterministic understanding of Islamic reform does not capture the complexities, diversity, and aporias this concept enunciates.