

Cemil Aydın. *The Idea of the Muslim World. A Global Intellectual History.*
Boston: Harvard University Press. 2017. 304 pages.
ISBN-13: 9780674050372.

Reviewed by **Mustafa Aslan**

Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Germany

Mustafa.Aslan@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

The “Muslim world” has been a pervasive and far-reaching trope, to which Muslims and non-Muslims alike have widely appealed over recent decades. Arguably it continues to persist today in both scholarly circles and public opinion, denoting a vast, coherent community united by mutual values and geopolitical concerns. As this putative notion of the Muslim world has been taken for granted so long, its validity, coherence and foundations have seldom been disputed. Responding to this lack of critical attention, Cemil Aydın’s *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* makes a well-conceived venture into the peculiar history of the idea of the Muslim world, and lays out its intellectual origins. Aydın is currently Associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina. His research interests mostly pertain to the formation of the Modern Middle East, imperial era conflicts, as well as the processes of decolonisation during the 20th century.

The Idea of the Muslim World consists of six chapters, an introduction, and conclusion which amount to 237 pages in total. As is clear from the introduction onwards, the book functions as a critical genealogy, essentially arguing that the idea of the Muslim world was not something inherent to the Islamic tradition but was, rather, historically contingent. Aydın describes how this idea became most evident at the end of the 19th century, emerging as a result of a series of interrelated historical and intellectual developments. In stressing historical contingency, Aydın also seeks to undermine the ingrained – essentialising and ahistorical – perceptions of the Muslim world.

To support this primary argument, Aydın presents a complex historical narrative throughout the book. He begins his narrative by demonstrating how the idea of the Muslim world was still in its infancy before the beginning of the 19th century, and yet to properly emerge. At the time, as Aydın argues, the world order was predicated on an imperial system in which different ethnic and religious groups lived under the protection of a ruler who might not share their language, heritage or beliefs (p. 38). Cases in point were the Ottoman and British empires; the former was predominantly a mixture of Christians and Muslims whereas the latter a mixture of Christians, Muslims and Hindus. In a world where ethnic and religious markers did not determine people’s senses of belonging and loyalty, essentialist spatial-cultural conceptions such as “the Muslim world” or “the West” were resisted. However, Aydın points to several historical contingencies that started to disrupt this imperial cosmopolitanism during the 19th century. The Ottoman Empire witnessed the advent of nationalist rebellions by its Christian subjects, particularly in the Balkans, and dealt with these challenges mostly

with military force. Concurrently, European empires intensified their colonial campaigns in regions such as India and North Africa, territories that were inhabited by vast populations of Muslims. These prompted significant conflicts such as the Greek War of Independence, the French invasion of Algeria and the Indian Rebellion (p. 50). These conflicts eventually changed the landscape of politics worldwide. Not only did they disrupt the imperial balance based on cosmopolitanism, but they also catalysed the contention between Muslims and Christians towards the end of the 19th century.

For Aydın, the effect of this changing state of affairs was twofold. Firstly, in Europe, it materialised the systematic racialisation of Muslim-ness predicated on Orientalist discourses. This, then, led to the emergence of pan-Islamist and modernist movements in the provinces of the Ottoman Empire and other regions where Muslims lived (p. 56-82). To tackle the Orientalist discourses that represented Islam as backward, modernist Muslim thinkers such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā promulgated novel renderings of Islam as a universal religion and formed new narratives of Islamic civilisation (p. 71-76). Naturally, these developments helped the idea of the Muslim world to mature. According to Aydın, these pan-Islamist renderings addressed Orientalist discourses to some degree on the conceptual level. However, on the practical level, they could not marshal solidarity among Muslims mostly because different subgroups of Muslims accommodated divided loyalties to different polities at the end of the 19th century (p. 91-96). On the other hand, for rulers like the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), pan-Islamism was mostly a political instrument, which he used to gain concessions from European powers in an era of decline. Here, contrary to the conventional image of Sultan Abdülhamid as an idealist pan-Islamist figure, Aydın presents him more as a pragmatic leader, driven by various political interests (p. 96-98). All in all, the turn of the 20th century marks a defining moment when the idea of the Muslim world matured. Afterwards, it survived through the 20th century, albeit in novel forms as new nation-states and 20th-century Islamism emerged. Aydın describes how the idea of the Muslim world remains in the imagination of Muslims today. However, he contends, on the level of international politics, a united Muslim world has been an unrealistic project since Muslims were divided across their various political, religious and cultural commitments.

The Idea of the Muslim World has a well-organised structure. Chapters are coherently divided across overarching themes and historical periods. Beyond the typical review of historical and intellectual developments, it fosters a burgeoning approach by tracing how the impact of these developments resonated through their time and permeated across different geographical regions. Ultimately, the book argues that the idea of the Muslim world emerged in relation to these developments. At this point, however, one critical caveat should be conveyed. In the introduction of the book, Aydın quickly disavows that the idea of the Muslim world might as well partly be rooted in the Islamic tradition. For instance, he argues that the Muslim world does not derive from the concept of *‘ummā*, which fundamentally refers to the Muslim religious community (p. 3). But he does not offer any solid argument to back up this claim. Whilst appreciating the historical contingency of the idea of the Muslim world, one can equally argue that

it was initially entrenched in Islamic tradition. Furthermore, as the book's historical narrative of the 19th century is primarily derived from its analysis of the Ottoman and British Empires, its rendering of the other equally important and relevant multi-religious 19th-century polities, such as the Russian and French Empires, remains limited. Nevertheless, despite these minor flaws, Cemil Aydın's *The Idea of the Muslim World* is an informative and insightful reading for anyone who wants to dissect the complex history behind the idea of the Muslim world.