

Book Review: M. Steven Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence* (New York: Oxford University Press), 385 pages.

Do Non-Muslims Resemble?

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M. Steven Fish's *Are Muslims Distinctive?* is a long overdue book in comparative politics, given the booming cross-national survey research over the past decade. Through a systematic study of the World Value Survey (WVS) and other datasets, Fish investigates the question of whether Muslims and non-Muslims are distinctive from each other. The publication of this book and its distinguishing scientific approach preludes a new trend in the study of Islam and politics. It integrates rigorous empirical data analysis and in-depth qualitative study of explanations and interpretations with contextual knowledge.

The dichotomy of Muslims and non-Muslims is the most essential concept in this book. Fish attempts to validate this dichotomy by stating, "In public consciousness in the West, as well as in non-Muslim regions of Asia and Africa, there is widespread unease about Islam" (p. 4), while he also notes, "On the other side, many Muslims feel under siege. They perceive an unjustified growth of Islamophobia in the world" (p. 5). Indeed, these dichotomous views have been widely held. To substantiate that this dichotomy truly exists, however, one must demonstrate what makes Muslims unique from believers of other religions, and why people of other religions can be lumped together, separate from Muslims.

Throughout the book, Fish provides rich descriptive explanations, using analytical methods to present the data of a multivariate context. The major findings for Muslims' distinctiveness, on the one hand, include more need than in non-Muslim societies for political leaders to be religious, less tolerance of controversial behavior, a lower level of violent crime, a higher level of terrorist activity, a greater acceptance of gender-based inequality, greater lower class inequality, and rarer occurrence of democratic regimes. On the other hand, Muslims do not differ from non-Muslims with regard to level of personal religiosity, attitude toward the involvement of religious leaders in politics, level of personal sociability, level of membership in formal organizations, intolerance of dishonest behavior, level of corruption, and level of large-scale

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political violence (pp. 255-256).

Some of the findings seem to contradict the conventional wisdom that Muslims tend to be more radical and violent than non-Muslims, a perception associated with terrorist activities involving Islamist groups. For instance, Muslims are neither more religious nor more violent than non-Muslims. Furthermore, Muslims are not more supportive of religious leaders' involvement in politics than non-Muslims. These individual-level findings all indicate misperception of Muslims and ingrained prejudice that demonizes the Islamic religion. However, some other findings about Muslim societies might foster a stereotypical view of Islam, such as less social tolerance, frequent terrorist activities, higher anticipation of religiosity among political leaders, and very low level of democracy. These findings dwell on the individual-level and country-level relationships, but still we need to resolve the mixed and conflicting evidence for the future. Thus, the inconsistency provides a positive new direction of research regarding the Islamic world.

The mixed evidence is intriguing. If we decompose the non-Muslim group into different religious categories such as Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, Buddhism, and Hinduism, we may find very different relationships than expected among the followers of these faiths. But are we going to argue there exist certain meaningful and substantial differences among particular societies with different religions? The chance is slim if nothing strikes us as religiously affiliated. Nevertheless, the frequent conflict between followers of Islam and the West in international politics seems so obvious that it actually manifests the Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomy as well as the stereotypical viewpoints that Fish tries to deconstruct.

As a scientific study of Islamic society, there are many advantages of this book. The style of writing and presentation of the data are to be commended. First, Fish tries very hard, and indeed does very positive work, to educate the reader how to make sense of the advanced statistical methods he applies. Not only does the preface have clear explanations on how to read the tables, but also the end of the book contains detail information about the methodology and the datasets, as well as a check on robustness. Second, the writing is well organized according to scientific standards, which enables the reader to quickly understand the major findings in each chapter. Additionally, Fish provides rich discussions on how to assess the implications of his understanding of Muslim society. The speculations, based on rigorous empirical evidence, are very helpful in imbuing the reader with deeper thoughts. Third, the empirical results of this book do not come exclusively from a single dataset. Rather, Fish spends much effort to use multiple datasets and corresponding statistical approaches to achieve his analytical purpose. Particularly, he highlights the transparency of his statistical analysis by providing all the necessary information, such as specifications of all the regression models in the appendix. Fourth, besides the significant test of regression coefficients, Fish provides many figures to show the substantial significance of the empirical findings in order to prevent

possible misinterpretations. For instance, the hierarchical generalized linear model presented in table 2.13 shows a stronger relationship between being a Muslim (beta=0.49***) than a Christian (beta=0.43***) and agreement that it would be better if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office. To show exactly what the difference is, Fish transforms the beta coefficients into the predicted probability measure and demonstrates that the actual difference is very limited (0.48 vs. 0.44). All of the above advantages make this book easily accessible to the reader, even if he or she lacks knowledge of statistics.

Another contribution of this book is the strong commitment to scientific rigor and analytical objectivity. Some suggestions might be helpful, however, regarding methodology. First, for most of the statistical models, the main individual-level and country-level explanatory variables are *Muslim* and *proportion of Muslim population*. Fish intends to compare the effects of both variables versus the effects of *Christian* and *proportion of Christian population*. Instead of targeting a coherent non-Muslim category, most of the findings aim at answering the question, “Are Muslims distinctive from Christians?” In particular, as table 2.1 (p. 22) makes evident, the majority of the samples are composed of Christians, Muslims, and respondents without denomination (50.6 percent, 23.6 percent, and 17.1 percent, respectively); the rest of all other religions have only 8.7 percent in the overall samples. This indicates that the default category of the regression model should be people without religious denomination, but not other religions. If so, then an individual-level predictor such as *Muslim* or *Christian* is not very meaningful, since the significance is the difference between having or not having religious belief rather than between Muslim and non-Muslim. A similar problem also happens when we interpret the country-level variable, *proportion of Muslim population*. Despite the fact that this variable is formulated as a continuous variable, it is not independent of *proportion of Christian population* and the unspecified default category, *proportion of non-Muslim and non-Christian population*. Therefore, the coefficient of *proportion of Muslim population* should not be interpreted as the contextual effect of “more Muslim-like society,” because any different compositions of the proportion of Muslims, Christians, other religions, and people without denominations should be viewed as unique types of society. Given these technical problems, the author risks that the reader will become confused about how to interpret the study’s main findings.

Second, other datasets might provide more information than WVS for certain topics in this book. For instance, Global Barometer Survey contains several batteries to measure people’s attitudes toward democracy. It not only contains two statements that WVS employed to measure support for democracy—“We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things,” and “The army should come in to govern the country”—but also it includes measurements such as “satisfaction with democracy,” “suitability of democracy,” and “support of democracy.” In fact, in terms of the religious population, the last version of the Global Barometer, the July

2009 release, provides a very different collection of samples, which covers fifty-five countries in Africa, East and South Asia, Central and South America, and the Middle East. While it might be too demanding to ask, some problems due to the data restriction might be alleviated if additional datasets were added to the analysis. For instance, religious affiliation in the Global Barometer is very evenly distributed: Roman Catholic 27.6 percent, Protestant 8.7 percent, Muslim 24.2 percent, Hindu 4 percent, Eastern Orthodox 23.3 percent, and others 12.2 percent.

Third, there are some methodological concerns in the statistical analysis. Regarding the use of the logit model, since the transformation of the log odds-ratio to the predicted probability is nonlinear, different choices of the baseline profile would have affected the results significantly. For instance, Fish uses country means to center the individual-level variables and grand means to center the country-level variables. He computes the predicted probability holding all variables at the averages, while varying the explanatory variable. Thus, the baseline profile will contain certain information, such as a person living in a society, with the average level proportions of Muslims and Christians. This is not very realistic, since there is no society where the proportions of Muslim and Christian populations are at the mean level. Instead of centering, fixing the baseline profile at a certain meaningful level might be a better option. Of course, doing so might change the range of variations for the predicted probability due to the nonlinear transformation.

Another methodological concern is the model specification of the multilevel modeling (HLM/HGLM). For all of the hierarchical linear/nonlinear models, Fish specifies only contextual effects, which explains the different country intercepts. However, it is more interesting to specify crossover effects to see whether the variation of the individual relationship across different countries can be explained by specific country-level variables. Adopting this strategy might further address some unanswered questions. For instance, if we specify the crossover effects of GDP per capita on the individual-level relationship between *Muslim* and *support for democracy*, we might find that it is the lower socioeconomic context that leads to a slightly lower level of *support for democracy among Muslims*, provided that the positive crossover coefficient of *GDP per capita* is countervailing to the negative individual-level coefficient of *Muslim*.

Finally, with regard to model specifications, much space could be saved if only the full models were presented. This would further simplify most of the tables and leave more room for other advanced tests, such as crossover effects, to be carried out. In fact, since most of the variables are formed by using survey data, Fish might consider paying greater attention to the measurement issue, especially the test of construct validity. Various methods such as exploratory/confirmative factor analysis, IRT models, path analysis, or structural equation modeling can be applied to address this concern.

Overall, Fish's new book opens a new exploration of Islamic studies.

Though lacking theoretical explanations, many descriptive statements based on rigorous empirical analysis from cross-national surveys compel urgency for scholarly attention to these interesting but controversial findings. As the Arab Spring movement spread recently from Tunisia and Egypt to Libya, we might expect to see a new wave of political liberalization in the Arab World. This will allow additional research opportunities for survey projects, and many of the data restrictions by then will have been reduced significantly. We look forward to seeing more research that provides theoretical explanations of the intriguing evidence from the excellent work, *Are Muslims Distinctive?*

