
Reviewed by Hannah Rigg

Introducing new technologies is often fraught with unforeseen problems. Besides simply adopting or marketing new products, these material objects can often come to represent larger societal or political questions about modernity, change, power or foreign influence. In his book *Modern Things on Trial: Islam’s Global and Material Reformation in the Age of Rida, 1865–1935,* Leor Halevi uses objects—from toilet paper to gramophones to “sexy” French trousers—to discuss the larger questions regarding Islamic reform at the turn of the twentieth century. He does this through fatwas issued by the religious reformer Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, an Ottoman Syrian cleric who moved to Cairo. There, he founded a magazine called *al-Manār,* or the Lighthouse, and sought the patronage of Muḥammad ‘Abduh, an Islamic reformer. Riḍā is often considered the successor to the efforts by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh to reform Islam in an age of European dominance. Halevi’s discussion questions standard historical narratives about who drives Islamic reform, calls for a new perception of Riḍā as a reformer in relation to his famous predecessors and proposes a new understanding of the development of Salafism.

Halevi begins by arguing that, until recently, scholarship on Islam has often neglected material objects. By examining these objects and the discussions surrounding them, he aims to contribute to the scholarship on Islamic law in the early twentieth century and clarify Riḍā’s own particular brand of reform. Halevi seeks both to illuminate the pragmatism of the legal arguments about these goods and to push back against the assumption that modern goods or new technologies are inherently Westernizing agents. Instead, he claims that these goods can serve as material agents in Islamic reform, a goal Riḍā often had in mind when issuing his fatwas. Halevi also corrects perceptions about Riḍā’s role in the development of Salafism. Al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh are thought of as the reformers who helped start Salafism. To correct the religious errors of the later generations of Muslims, ‘Abduh and al-Afghani follow the lives of the earliest generations of Muslims, the Salaf, as role models. It is sometimes assumed that Riḍā was merely a successor to al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh, with no innovations of his own. Another common narrative around Riḍā is that his religious rulings and legal arguments became more

Hannah Rigg holds a MA in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University and teaches adult education and ESL in New York.

hh.rigg@gmail.com

www.plutojournals.com/asq/
fundamentalist and less liberal throughout his tenure at *al-Manar*. But the author argues against these presumptions. He depicts Riḍā’s rulings as consistent over time, often in favor of new technology or economic practices. Halevi also argues that Riḍā is different from his predecessors due to his focus on specific material objects and the use of detailed explanations in his fatwas. For example, compared to Riḍā, ‘Abduh’s fatwas were often vaguer and lacked the methodical use of the Salaf when legitimizing modern capitalistic practices (107).

When explaining how Riḍā and others around this time used the image of the Salaf, Halevi writes that “the Salaf in the early twentieth century functioned above all as a flexible tool of reform” as opposed to a coherent ideology with a strict system of beliefs (23). He depicts reform at this point as coming from below, pushed forward by fatwa requests and laypeople’s concerns about new technologies and commodities. He uses the term “laissez-faire Salafism” to describe Riḍā’s particular strain of belief: that adherence to Islam and its original spirit would lead Muslims to prosperity and influence, a stance that usually guided his approach to fatwas.

The first three chapters help provide background information on *al-Manār* and Riḍā. Riḍā was born in 1865, in the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire; educated in Tripoli, he moved to Cairo in 1897. There, he set up a publishing house and published the first issue of *al-Manār* in 1898. At this point, Cairo was under British control, Egypt having become an unofficial British protectorate after British forces entered in 1882. Halevi begins most of his chapters by summarizing a fatwa about a specific object, using the fatwa to lead into the larger questions the object represented. Establishing the pattern of Riḍā’s fatwas, Halevi starts with a discussion of a toilet paper fatwa; the commodity (in this case, toilet paper) came first, followed by religious debate and discussions in the lay community. It was only after these discussions that Riḍā’s legal opinion was solicited and a legal ruling issued. In the case of toilet paper, the question-seeker had asked (somewhat humorously) whether it would be better to use water and stones in the same manner as the Prophet Muḥammad instead of the new European paper product. Riḍā, showing his distaste for strict Quranic imitation without considering the spirit of the law or the material benefits of new technology, ruled that toilet paper was allowed and even preferred to the stones, as it served the same purpose but in a superior way. In this example, as in the rest of Riḍā’s rulings, the questions of the laypeople drove the fatwas; the people themselves were the authorizing agents of the legal questions.

Halevi splits Riḍā’s fatwas into two periods, those issued before 1919 and those issued after. The discussion of the pre-1919 fatwas illustrates Riḍā’s general aim: to sanction modern practices beneficial to Muslims’ participation in capitalism while using the Qur’ān and the Ḥadith (as opposed to later judicial conventions) to assess modern life. To illuminate these goals, Halevi discusses several complicated questions Riḍā received about the use of paper banknotes instead of coins made from
precious metals. For example, considering the differing rules for alms taxes depending on the possession, how would these new paper notes be taxed? Riḍā ignored medieval perspectives to return to the original proscriptions about usury, in order to argue for the best answer to these questions. In his opinion, the original Islamic scriptures apply to new inventions; showing this to his readers was an important part of his mission. Riḍā’s goal was to “give the ancient of canons of Islam a renewed life in modern times, and, on the other hand, to reduce barriers to free trade” (111), a goal which required deep scriptural analysis and innovative thinking.

The end of the book deals with Riḍā’s gradual shift from imperial to nationalistic arguments during the interwar period. Through a fatwa warning against “sexy French trousers”—a new craze in Beirut imported from France—Halevi shows how Riḍā’s thinking changed from earlier rulings allowing European fashions to demonstrate a more nationalistic mindset. But, Halevi argues, this was not a turn away from liberalism to fundamentalism, as other scholars have claimed. Instead, influenced by Gandhi’s writings (a translation of which he had published), Riḍā began to assess consumption of goods within a nationalistic political framework and championed local economic products as resistance to colonialism.

Throughout this book, Halevi successfully demonstrates Riḍā’s commitment to Islamic values, free trade, and global reform through a deep interrogation of Riḍā’s fatwas issued to Muslims across the globe. These fatwas cover a wide range of topics, including toilet paper, telegraphs, photographs, gramophones, company shares, interest rates and railways; and his discussion requires intensive background information, resulting in a dense exploration of the subject matter. But Halevi is incredibly thorough in explaining and exploring his points and connecting these disparate items to Riḍā’s general themes of reform, economic improvement and technological advancement. Riḍā’s reasoning reveals a reformer set on improving the Islamic world, one who believed that technology and economic prosperity would help with that goal. Halevi’s work contributes to the larger understanding of how Islamic reform in this period was often driven through the historical narrative of Riḍā as a reformer, illustrating a bottom-up process.

Scholars focusing on the issues of Islamic reform, especially reform under colonial occupation before World War I and in the interwar period, would find Halevi’s work insightful, as would those focused on Riḍā or the development of Salafist thought at the turn of the century. Readers interested in the intersection of modernity and colonial subjects will enjoy how Halevi complicates the relationship between those under European dominion and their consumption of European products. Finally, those interested in the history of how objects are used and seen by their users will find Riḍā’s fatwas revealing in what they expose about the mindset of these products’ consumers.