

Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam

Fethi Benslama (tr. Robert Bononno)

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As a particular outgrowth of modernity, Islamism has garnered the attention of a great many theorists. In *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, Fethi Benslama, a psychoanalyst and professor, elaborates upon the precise undergirding apparatus that sustains the logic of Islamism as a recently conceived phenomenon. The book attempts to clearly define the logical progression of Islamism since its point of conception. This point is located in the colonial era, when “traditional” Islam was put under the intense strain of a developed European modernity. The violent break, along with all the baggage that was incapable of being properly allocated and refined by “what Freud called the ‘cultural work’ (*Kulturarbeit*)” (p. ix), produced an explosive cocktail that has and continues to haunt the project of modernity. Through the use of a unique theoretical style called deconstructionist psychoanalysis, Benslama’s project seeks to account for this pervasive phenomenon.

“Islam has never been a major concern for me or my generation. It was because Islam began to take an interest in us that I decided to take an interest in it” (p. 1). This is the way Benslama begins the first section of his book. It marks not only his secular disposition but also the aggressivity associated with the burgeoning Islamist political movements. Islamism is strictly conceptualized as a phenomenon that differs from fundamentalism. It has the capacity to operate through the decomposition of traditionalism – one occur-

rence associated with this downfall is the “catastrophic collapse of [traditional] language” (p. 4).

Benslama is particularly interested in the Islamist fixation on the supposed “origins” of Islam. Utilizing one of Freud’s cardinal arguments proposed in his *Moses and Monotheism* (p. 11), the author posits that this so-called sacred origin is always-already infiltrated by a foreign body, that its status as complete and self-contained is thoroughly fallacious. This is related to the primary psychoanalytic insight that one’s primal relation with the (m)Other is never unitary. The author quotes Kierkegaard’s anecdote that “the despair ... wills to be Itself” (p. 5) to emphasize how the quest for recovering one’s origins is a natural consequence of the aforementioned violent break from tradition. By evoking Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Benslama draws the reader to the plasticity of the material associated with the narrative of origins. Rushdie is compared to the figure of Oedipus in his confrontation with the Sphinx due to his ability to answer the riddle associated with the question of origin (p. 17). The denial of interpretation (*ta’wil*) by Islamism is synonymous with the denial of the impossibility of origin, an impossibility that is continually concealed by conservative illusion.

The third section begins with a reminder of the paternal figure’s importance in each of the three dominant monotheistic strains. By delving into the Abrahamic narrative, Benslama unearths what is truly unique when it comes to the figure of the Father. The relationship between Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael is of extreme importance. While, historically speaking, there has been an attempt to relegate the significance of Hagar and Ishmael to non-significance, these two ancestors of Islam are investigated quite closely in this section.

It is through Hagar, who bypasses the impasse of the promised child, that the idea of female *jouissance* (p. 80) is brought into the very core of the Islamic experience. It is the overflowing character of this non-phallic form of *jouissance* that is continually covered over by Islamism’s conception of the originary moment. Her ability to both see and name the Absolute is part and parcel of a specific uncontainable power that alters names and establishes the very possibility of an impossible provenance. When she gives birth to Abraham’s son, Abraham is automatically considered the Father in the Islamic tradition. Benslama makes note of the fact that the Islamic idea of God’s uniqueness is asserted because it was a concubine who gave Abraham his first son, not God himself. Hagar’s intervention did not dissolve the earlier impasse, but rather gave body to it. Without Hagar there would not have been a “there is, there is not” (p. 91). According to Benslama, it is the primal withdrawal that is withdrawn by the Islamists.

Section 3 begins with Benslama detailing the difference between the psychoanalytic categories of denial and disavowal (*Verleugnung*) and explaining how Hagar's presence as the founding maternal figure in Islam has been disavowed by the religion to which she was so instrumental in bringing to fruition. Benslama contends that the disavowal of Hagar as a reflection of erasing female *jouissance* is always bound to fail, for the overflowing character of this substance can never be fully absorbed. There is always a little too much spillage. This is exhibited not only in Hagar but also in Ruqayya, Abdullah's (the Prophet's father) object of desire and all Muslim women in general. It is through this avenue that the veil is understood by Benslama not as a form of symbolism, but as an inhibitor of female monstration, rooted in the impossible. The end of the third section and the beginning of the fourth deal with an investigation of *The Arabian Nights*. One of the principal conclusions drawn involves the way the madness of expunging the power of the feminine is remedied through reconstituting imaginary linkages. The relationship between Shahrzad and Sharayar is used to exemplify this point.

Benslama's text is a tour de force, reflecting not only a persona who has a masterful command of psychoanalysis but someone who has insight into a form of intellectual creativity that is lacking in much of today's scholarship on Islam. Though a few concepts could have been more thoroughly fleshed out (such as auto-immunization), the book as a whole represents the most comprehensive psychoanalytic evaluation of Islam and the phenomenon of Islamism to date. It is recommended for both specialists and non-specialists alike, though some prior knowledge of psychoanalytic theory would be helpful.

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