Freedom and Orthodoxy: Islam and Difference in the Post-Andalusian Age

Anouar Majid
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004. 270 pages.

Freedom and Orthodoxy is a brilliant apology for dismantling the hegemonic and false pretensions of western universalisms in favor of a world in which local groups (e.g., religious communities, regions, and nations) are allowed to construe their own strategies for cultural, political, and economic flourishing. A Moroccan intellectual teaching in the United States (chair of the Department of English, University of New England) and a leading young cultural critic who writes in a lucid and often elegant English prose, Anouar Majid's French cultural background also shines through, judging by his abundant use of French sources (though not one in Arabic).

Building on his previous book, *Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World* (Duke University Press: 2000), Majid expands and deepens his historical and philosophical analysis, exhorts both Muslims and westerners to search their souls, remove the roots of their own cherished certainties that exclude the Other (i.e., fundamentalisms), and engage in the path of creative dialog. Yet as the book unfolds, it turns out that over 90 percent of the material relates to the western universalisms born of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment – ideals that, in fact, cannot be separated from the historical realities of the Reconquista, the Spanish conquest of Latin America, the Anglo-American colonization of North America, and the subsequent genocide of the native population. Even the revolutionary ideals of the American and French revolutions, however universal the reach of freedom and human rights might have been in theory, came to be wedded to a capitalist ideology that has, in the postcolonial era, become an economic and cultural steamroller, a globalization process that consolidates western hegemony and imposes its secular and consumerist values on the non-western world.

Besides the already heavy toll in human suffering, Majid argues that far greater clashes loom on the horizon if this scenario continues. This brings us to the remaining 10 percent of his book: although Muslims must take responsibility for their own extremists and find ways to reinterpret the traditional Shari`ah in a polycentric world, nevertheless, contemporary Islamic militancy should be seen as an offshoot of "the triumph of capitalism and its ongoing legacy of conquest" (pp. 213-14). Hence, most of the book unveils what he has coined "the post-Andalusian paradigm," or the

history of western greed and arrogance, including its bouts of well-intentioned paternalism.

Majid's first chapter examines the legacy of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism twenty-five years later. Despite some valid criticisms, he maintains that Said's main contribution was to show that the West "has gone beyond the primitive human impulse to construct Otherness" in such a way as to reinforce one's own identity to the exclusion of the Other; the West has, in fact, inscribed "such a tendency in a larger ideology of domination" (pp. 4-5). But Said's greatest shortfall is his silence about the impact of capitalism and the twin revolutions (American and French), both crucial factors that have come to define the western secular "social imaginary" (a web in which even Karl Marx was entangled). Thus Said's project of de-Orientalizing academic discourse will accomplish little unless "the much stronger forces of history – the naturally universalist tendencies of both Christian millennialism, Enlightenment ideals, and capitalist ideologies – are not seriously interrogated and dismantled" (p. 20).

The next three chapters build Majid's historical case for "the post-Andalusian paradigm" (1492 to the present). First, in "Other Worlds, New Muslims," he highlights the connection between the Spanish wars to extirpate Muslims from Spain and their campaigns to destroy the stunningly advanced civilizations of indigenous America. Add to this the legacy of obsession under the Inquisition about the parallel purities of ethnicity and doctrine – an obsession later used to justify the military conquest and subjugation of the native American peoples, the new Muslim Other. Ironically, Anglo-American settlers in the north (chapter 2: "Empire of Liberty"), imbued with the ideals of the Enlightenment and revolution, at least in the first decades of the new nation, came to appreciate some of Islam's virtues through their countrymen's narratives of captivity at the hands of the Barbary pirates. The author demonstrates how these stories fed into the growing abolitionist movement. The darker side of American messianism, of course, was the universalist impulse of "manifest destiny," which spelled doom for the native populations.

In "Liberties Undone" (chapter 4), Majid describes the "third great wave of post-Andalusian ideologies": capitalism, starting in 1848 (Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875*) and gradually giving birth to the "postcolonial condition" we know today. In this chapter and the next ("Perils of Empire"), leaning on a variety of historians and critical theorists, his narrative provides telling vignettes of resistance to the white man's global rule: the American frontier through the voices of indigenous writers, Mexico's Zapatista rebellion, and the Saudi novelist Abderrahman Munif's characters (Majid's only foray into "Muslim" literature, pp. 144-49).

The author's last chapter, "Provincialisms Now," sums up his thesis: giving a chance to local cultures to thrive without losing sight of their common humanity. Again, the central focus is on the great culprit: western-led capitalism. Yet he also interacts, for the first time, with a contemporary Muslim "reformer," the Egyptian liberal thinker Sa`id al-`Ashmawy, who "has, in fact, charted out a path for Muslims and non-Muslims" (p. 209). The analysis is only three pages long, however, and al-`Ashmawy's influence in the Muslim world is rather limited. The other twenty pages or so in the last two chapters that deal with Islam and Muslim struggles with extremism (clearly a concern of his) are filled with the views of sociologists of religion.

Perhaps this is both the strength and weakness of Majid's work: an impressive command of the critical issues of the twentieth-century world (with some refreshing nuances: e.g., he defends Edith Wharton and keeps a critical gaze on postmodernism as a movement), but at the same time, a less-than-penetrating analysis of contemporary Islam (e.g., "Islamism has no pure identity and makes sense only within the larger context of Eurocentric hegemony," pp. 182-83). Obviously, there is more to say on this subject, and perhaps he does so in his forthcoming book, *A Call for Heresy*.

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