Book Reviews

Origins of the Muslim Revival: From al-Afghani to Hassan al-Banna, a Century of Islamic Reformism

By Tariq Ramadan. Bayard, 1998. 479 pp.

This is a timely publication, as a book written from an "Islamist" standpoint is a rarity in the French language. Tariq Ramadan has delved into the dynamics of reformism as a contextual and creative reassertion of the Islamic quest to civilizational empowerment — an empowerment that is based on spiritual uplifting, Islamic commitment and activism, *tajdid*, political reformism, and societal transformation in line with the foundational precepts of Islamic organization. This publication has already generated ample debate on the value of Islamic reformist thought, as well as the doctrinal inclinations and political strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Al Ikhwan al-Muslimīn*). Although the book is more descriptive than analytical, it has the merit of being well-researched and documented, and the variety of writing styles used by the author makes it all the more enjoyable to read.

The book is divided into three parts and is written following a logic that is meant to demonstrate that al-Banna's thought and practical contributions were anchored in reformist thought and that most of al-Banna's intellectual and political positions were not necessarily his or the movement's.

The first part, "Aux Sources de la Pensée Réformiste Contemporaine" (Origins of Contemporary Reformist Thought), deals with the Islamic intellectuals who opposed the status quo and the state of intellectual lethargy that reigned in the Muslim world. The author relates the intellectual content of reformist thinkers (Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, al-Afghani, Tahtawi, Abduh, Rida, Ben Badis, Nursi, and Iqbal) to the complex sociopolitical, cultural, and intellectual context within which their thought emerged. He considers the various tendencies of reformist thought (spiritual, educational, political, and economic) as complementing each other. Reformist thought has three foundational tenets: the necessity of a return to the authoritative sources of Islam and their contextual interpretation by using a *tajdidi* prism (a creative and productive intellectual approach) rather than *taqlid* (a re-interpretative and reproductive approach to thought) in dealing with the Qur'an and Sunnah; the necessity of resisting Western economic, political, and cultural domination through the reassertion of a dynamic and authentic Islamic personality; and the necessity of preserving and consolidating the unity of the Ummah.

Their intellectual contributions focus on two main points: the theoretical reformation of the basic themes of Islamic jurisprudence, especially those relating to the law of transactions (*fiqh al-mu'amallat*); and analytical responses to the local

and international environments, in particular those that affect the immediate context and the Ummah at large.

The second part of the book deals with the life and contributions of al-Banna, as it focuses on the development of the Muslim Brotherhood. The first chapter is centered on the development of al-Banna's intellectual and social persona from his early days in al-Mahmudiya where he was born in 1906, to his quest for political leadership in Egypt in the 1940s that led to his subsequent assassination by the secret police in 1949. It illustrates the level of influence that al-Afghani and Abduh had on his thought, especially on the issue of empowerment through educational and political reform and systematic social engagement and action. These intellectual positions and programmatic orientations were also influenced, to a large extent, by the psycho-temporal context within which Hassan al-Banna and his movement developed — a context characterized by the demise of the caliphate, the near-total colonization of the Muslim world by the West, and the ascendency of Western civilization.

Hassan al-Banna built on the thought and convictions of earlier Muslim scholars and interpreted the contributions of the reformist pioneers in line with the challenges that were confronting his Egyptian environment. The Islamic reference was the center of his conceptions of societal reform, liberation, and civilizational empowerment. However, his thought was more action-oriented than that of his predecessors, and the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in 1928 was construed as the leitmotiv for reformation-liberation-empowerment.

By relying on a well-structured movement, he developed a clear method of reform that was both systematic and gradual. It focused on the individual who needed to be reformed-liberated-empowered through a process of education-cum-socialization, as the individual would then transform the family and social environment, thus creating the necessary conditions for reforming both state and society. This strategy made the Muslim Brotherhood, in less than twenty years, the most efficient movement in Egypt.

Under al-Banna's direction (1928–1949), the movement realized most of its organizational and *da'wah* priorities by focusing on the implementation of an educational and social program (Islamization from below). This does not mean that it neglected the realm of politics — as the personal engagement of its leader in open political contests (general elections) demonstrates.

Al-Banna's contributions were not all abstract. They were primarily oriented to the liberation of the minds of Muslims from "Occidentosis" and their restructuring following a contextual interpretation of the foundational teachings of Islam and the essential tenets of Islamic jurisprudence. In fact, a reading of his writings and speeches demonstrate the nature of his motivations and the order of his strategic priorities. These were essentially spiritual motivations centered on the reawakening of the Islamic spirit and the concretization of the faith, the deepening of spirituality and the purification of the soul, coupled with the need to restore Egyptian

independence, to educate society in line with Islam and the priorities of the Ummah, and to establish a societal order in line with the Prophet's model. According to al-Banna, Islam, as a way of life, organically links the spiritual and the societal — a view that is exposed in his central trilogy: universality of the Islamic message, globality of its domain, and the prerequisite of vicegerency as represented in the notion of *rabbaniya*. He felt that it is only through the enacting of this trilogy that Muslims would be both liberated from Western domination and civilizationally empowered.

Because he was a talented public speaker and propagator of Islam, as well as a provocative writer and vocal activist, the British-backed monarchy used an array of tactics in dealing with him and his movement, including preemption, co-optation, legal restrictions, and judicial elimination. Al-Banna and his movement were seen as highly threatening to the monarchy's subservience to Britain, and indeed al-Banna was fervently opposed to British influence and domination, especially as far as the political and economic domains were concerned.

The third part of the book focuses on the challenges faced by the Muslim Brotherhood in the decades following the assassination of its founding father. The first challenge was related to the Palestinian question after the creation of Israel and the reshaping of regional geopolitics. Indeed, this new reality affected not only regional politics, but also the programmatic orientations and priorities of all vehicles of societal organization, and the Muslim Brotherhood was no exception.

The question of Palestine was central to the Ummatic outlook of the movement because of the clear British-Zionist design on the Holy Land, which was eventually implemented with the division of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of the Zionist entity on part of it. The Ikhwan called for the mobilization of volunteers to fight for the recovery of the lost land, and despite King Faruq's prompt intervention to stop the dispatch of such volunteers, their continued combat against the Zionists put the movement high on the target list of both the British and the Egyptian authorities. According to Ramadan, this involvement led to the meeting of the ambassadors of Britain, the United States, France, and the Soviet Union in December 1948, which called for the dissolution of the movement. Two days later, the Egyptian authorities ordered that all members of the now "dissolved association give up their arms and stop their combat" (p. 396). Subsequently the volunteers were arrested and kept in detention for several months. The positions taken by the Arab regimes on the issue of Palestine made the Ikhwan realize that they are facing new political and strategic realities: the division of the Arab world, accelerated repression, and increased alienation.

The second challenge that the movement faced was the military takeover in July 1952 of Egypt. The generals, led by Nasser, used the support of the Ikhwan who were seeking political legitimization. The Brotherhood was aspiring for unchecked social action and felt that Egyptian rule was better than any foreign governance;

however, it soon became evident that the movement's decision proved wrong as it faced fierce repression by fellow Muslims in the name of Egyptian nationalism.

This era (1954-69) was marked by waves of imprisonment and executions and was to be called the greatest tragedy (*al-mihna al-kubra*) of the movement, as its action became impossible and its leaders and intellectuals faced recurrent repressive excesses. This repression caused a radicalization of the intellectual fringes of the movement and the emergence of autonomous groups opting for the violent transformation of both state and society. However, these trends remained marginal and did not constitute, in any sense, a reorientation of the movement's political strategy or a reordering of its tactical options.

The works that Sayyid Qutb wrote in prison best exemplify the intellectual dimension of this radicalization and constitute a clear demarcation not only as far as the intellectual line of the movement, but also as far as Qutb himself is concerned. In fact, the Egyptian context and the repression to which he was subjected further radicalized his opinions on change and societal transformation — in particular his binary approach to social dynamism and his focus on *jihad* and *jahiliya*.

The Muslim Brotherhood, as a movement aiming at the gradual transformation of both society and state through peaceful means, demarcated itself from Qutb's perspective and condemned the emergence of new groups engaging in terrorist acts in the name of Islam (such as Islamic Jihad or al-Tafkir wa al-Hijra).

Ramadan concludes this long and overly-repetitive work by summarizing its three main points: first, that al-Banna's thought is ingrained in the reformist current and his immediate context; second, that his thought was more action-oriented than theoretical; and finally, that the movement is an adaptive vehicle for societal transformation of Egypt and the civilizational empowerment of Muslims.

Although this book lacks in originality, it has the merit of offering French-speaking readers a new perspective on Islamic thought and movement — a perspective that is written from within the cradle of the movement (the author is al-Banna's grandson) and that reflects the aspirations and disappointments of its members. One hopes this will continue to generate debate on the issue of Islamic thought and movement without remaining a prisoner of the Jules Ferrian cultural superiority complex that rejects anything that is not culturally French.

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