

A Fundamental Fear—Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism

By Bobby S. Sayyid. London & New York: Zed Books, Ltd. 1997, vi + 185 pp.

At first this book looks like another eye-catching, fear-mongering title about Islam. Are these books promoted by profit-hungry publishers or by underpaid fretful academics? Or has Islam become fair game for a wider unrestrained academia replacing the Orientalist school with newer analytical tools? Some preliminary remarks, or a contextualization, might be useful here.

Whatever its "resurgent" form, Islam is presenting something of an enigmatic challenge for all. From the bazaars of the East to the sidewalks of the West, it refuses to lie down or go away. Attempts to discount it, ignore it or even suppress it have not succeeded. This hauntingly recurring phenomenon (p. 1) needs to be relabeled and reassessed. But the doubt lingers that representing it as "terrorism," "theocracy," "obscurantism," "fundamentalism," or "religious extremism" has muddied waters even more. Feeding popular fears with such preconfigured terminology has neither satiated curiosity, quelled fears, nor brought anyone closer to the truth.

Compounding the picture is the "location" of the writers of such works: the world-view, epistemology, discourse theory, or narrative framework from which they approach Islam. The much-heralded objectivity of academia is sacrosanct no more. Relativity, subjectivity, and the actor's point of view are in vogue. Old Orientalist views and definitions of the non-Occidental world are being overwhelmed by an array of (neo-Orientalist) analyses from a variety of discourse perspectives.

These analytical tools, even if applied with some success to their own societies and disciplines this past century, don't seem to have much of a shelf life while some are less effective than others: positivist assertions fast give way to realist or interpretivist ones; modernist perspectives to postmodernist ones; and structuralist interpretations to poststructuralist ones. And when applied to Islam and Muslim societies, the results of these approaches can be bewildering (as shown by Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*), and so can their effects (as shown by Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* prognostication).

From its side, the Muslim world is all the more perplexed at the persistence of such stereotypical labeling and analyses. Generally unfamiliar with these "new" tools, their reaction is either to ignore this "demonology of fundamentalism" (p. 16) or to interpret it as another of the West's conspiracies against Islam. Sometimes it results in outright hostility (as shown by Khomeini's *fatwa* and Bradford's book burning) or crude attempts at redress in reciprocal terms (as in Akbar Ahmed's *Postmodernity and Islam*). To western experts, such reactions can only seem woefully inadequate.

Furthermore, the apparently monolithic scenario of western experts with their western critiques of the non-West is complicated by the emerging presence of nonwestern migrants and their offspring on the western academic scene. Taken

on or paraded as a visibly “ethnic” or “minority” face on some campuses, how do, or should, these “subaltern” (p. 136) academics perform? Are they western in their methods as well as their analyses? Is their identity and location now fully western as well? Put more generally, can one presume all western experts to be western?

Bobby S. Sayyid, a sociology lecturer at Manchester University and a director of CGEM (Centre for the Study of Globalization, Eurocentrism & Marginality) is faced with these challenges as he joins the fray to account for Islamic fundamentalism and the fear it generates. Not only does he deal with the issue in a fairly novel way but also from his own location and from that of others. One almost gets the impression of a devil’s advocate in him, sort of a judge of the judges.

As an “anti-foundationalist” (p. 74), Sayyid deconstructs the subject matter in terms of metanarratives, desedimentation, signification, modernity, Orientalism, identity, and westernism—all in the glow of a poststructuralist, postmodernist discourse. He avoids not only a religiohistorical approach but also the particularity of movements and their geocultural specificities (p. 5). In stamping his own mark on the fundamentalism question, he often challenges the readings of others by drawing on similar analytical tools. Hence the book resounds with terminology, some of which he defines or exemplifies while others he leaves to the reader. This might limit the book’s popularity as it flits between the sociological and Islamic in terms of concept and event.

Couched between the Prologue and the Epilogue are five busy chapters working hard to find space on the world’s stage for the contemporary resurgence of Islam in relation to life’s complex matrices and in contrast to most existing theories. All the while, the narrative is held together by Sayyid’s primary assertion that it is a project of a “political” nature (p. 5) and an “analytical category” (p. 8) as such. For him, “politics, then is the process by which societies arrive at a new vision of truth” (p. 12)—highlighting once again one of the challenges of the book (as noted earlier), namely, definitions.

Chapter 1 explores the nature of the crisis and questions “the themes commonly deployed to explain the emergence of Islamism” (p. 19). The views of Saghal and Yuval-Davis are singled out probably for their rather banal assertions about fundamentalism. Sayyid then gives his reasons for labeling it “Islamism.” However, viewing it as a “political discourse akin to other political discourses like socialism and liberalism” and defining “Islamists” as being “no more (or less) identical in their beliefs and motives than postmodern bourgeois liberals or socialists or nationalist” (p. 17) is questionable.

Discounting the possibility of its emergence purely out of the crisis facing Muslim communities due to the desedimentation of structures and identities (p. 26), chapter 2 examines the discourse on fundamentalism in the light of Edward Said’s critique of “Orientalism” and the consequent “anti-Orientalist” approach. “Strong orientalism” might explain how “the study of Islam emerges as a contrast to Christendom/the West/modernity” or as “a means of establishing and reinforcing the identify of the West” (p. 33), whereas “anti-Orientalism” leaves Islam decentered, dispersed, and disseminated in localized articulations of Islamic practices (p. 38). Resorting to the Saussurean linguistics, Sayyid argues that (the name) “Islam matters . . . [and] . . . despite its polysemy, it retains its

singularity" (p. 40) and that by its continued articulation as a "master-signifier" or as a "crucial nodal point" in relation to its "foundational moment," for Muslims it has "emerged as the means of articulating a multiplicity of positions without losing its specificity" (pp. 41–46). It is in this sense, he claims, that "Islamists" seek to appropriate Islam for their "Islamism" project and not "due to the reputed indivisibility of politics and religion in Islam" (p. 46).

Chapter 3 sets out the scene that later enabled the monopolization of Islam and all that it signifies, especially in contrast to its opposites. First, the caliphate's abolition led to the flotation of the master-signifier (Islam) to which it was intrinsically linked. Second, the emergence of westernizing, modernist, progressive, and markedly deIslamizing regimes ("Kemalist" as Sayyid categorizes them) helped inadvertently to arrest Islam's dissolution as they needed "to inscribe Islam as their exterior" (p. 73). So after more than a millennium, Islam was now made available for re-inscription: all it needed was space and someone for its re-articulation and mobilization.

But how did this space become available, and how was it that only the "Islamists" came to monopolize this space? Chapter 4 is where Sayyid's thesis unfolds: That the shift from modernity's "West is best" meta-narrative (its withdrawal from its colonies, for example) allowed discursive space for a host of other articulations in the postmodernist era; and that the erosion or weakening of modernity's handmaiden in the Muslim world, namely, "the Kemalist *anciens regimes*," and all that modernity stood for, from around the mid-seventies, created the physical space (p. 84) for the Islamists. To Sayyid, Khomeini symbolized the Islamist, not so much for his anti-West rhetoric but for his use of "modern" political concepts while radically altering Shi'i political beliefs. Through the Iranian revolution, "the discourse of Islamism was able to constitute a new subjectivity, that is, a Muslim as a political, anti-monarchic, anti-imperialist subject" (p. 93) rather than the caricature of Islamists as antimoderns, for they "may reject some aspects of modernity and embrace others" (p. 97). At this point he dismisses Akbar Ahmed's "apologia" that fundamentalism is a reaction to the uncertainties of postmodernism and its "other" (pp. 111–112). He contends that by conducting his discourse "exclusively in the idiom of Islamic political theory" (p. 113), Khomeini very much reflects the postmodernist trend of decentering the West, albeit in the Muslim world: "it is only with Khomeini that the role of western discourse as universal interlocutor appears to be shaken . . . in fact it seems to be the major source of his success" (pp. 113–114). So, while Kemalists viewed modernization and westernization as fundamentally the same thing, "the appeal and power of Islamist projects are due to the way they are able to combine the deconstructionist logic of the postmodern critique of modernity with an attempt to speak from another center, outside the orbit of the West" (p. 120).

In chapter 5 (which seems a bit of an anticlimax and might have been better placed as chapter 3 or 4), Sayyid sees the logic of "Eurocentrism" as a "project to recenter the West . . . an attempt to sustain the universality of the western project, in conditions in which its universality can no longer be taken for granted" (p. 128) becoming hegemonic. After the victory in the cold war, it represents "one of the major strands by which the network of global western power is held together . . . the invisible empire which keeps the 'Rest' in place" (p. 129). Attempts at re-inscribing Islamism as an incoherent, unauthentic, or dependent

particularity within the universalized Eurocentric hegemony are a consequence of when “the displacement of a western canon is experienced as a loss by those who are most involved in narrating and extending that canon” (p. 149). Rather, the advent of Islamism questions Europe’s claims to copyright of a universal order and as a source of direct emulation (p. 150). The struggle between the two is “really a conflict about genealogies—a struggle about how to narrate the future of the world” (p. 149).

To summarize, Sayyid views the fear that Islamism generates as lying not so much in its essence nor in its military potency but rather in the implications of its refusal to accept or even “recognize the universalism of the western project” (p. 129). The hegemony of this discourse and that of its advocates, has been eroded, and hence it is “western” or “westoxicated” academics and politicians who feel threatened. Their attempts so far to re-inscribe, re-own, or marginalize Islamism have not succeeded much.

If there are shortcomings in *A Fundamental Fear*, besides the irony of analyzing a counter-western narrative in very western terms, then equating Khomeinism with Islamism, even if only symbolically or metaphorically, is one. This only perpetuates the very western projection of Islam as a project of incoherent bloodthirsty bearded mullahs—unless of course it is meant to rehabilitate his image in postmodernist terms. Likewise, some analysis of the Islamists and their responses to western critiques of Islamism would have been a useful dimension to the book. As for its readability, while the size makes it attractive, its condensed, almost lecture-note, exploratory style might distract the uninitiated. Also, some chapters should have been more fully titled, or conversely less crowded, by having more chapters instead of the perfunctory five.

On the whole, Bobby Sayyid’s book might not be a “second coming” (after E. Said’s book, *Orientalism*), but it may step on the toes of many a western analyst of Islam and Muslims. As Niall Ferguson (a fellow at Oxford’s Jesus College) already laments: “In the name of Postmodernism, an ever-growing band of academic saboteurs is engaged in subverting the fundamental Enlightenment distinction between the objective and the subjective . . . from one Faculty to the next, turning more and more scholarship into obscure compilations of jargon . . . one by one, the political achievements of the 18th Century are being undone . . . Islam is in the ascendant . . .” (*Daily Telegraph*, Nov. 11, 1997). For me, though, by critically examining contemporary western critiques of fundamentalism and offering his own reading in “western” jargon as well, Sayyid has put some “fun” back into “fundamentalism.”

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