

Book Review

Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity

by William Montgomery Watt; London and New York: Routledge, 1988, 158 pp., cloth.

Revolt Against Modernity

by Michael Youssef; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985, 189 pp., cloth.

The two books under review are part of a larger literature appearing in the West lately on the encounter between Islam and Western modernity. The underlying assumption of the works of both Watt and Youssef is that Westernization, or "cultural modernization," is the only alternative to the alleged "decline and crisis" of Islam in the modern world. Westernization, in this sense, manifests an implicit cultural superiority over the Islamic culture. Although following different approaches and methods of analysis, both Watt and Youssef contend that if Muslims are to advance, they have to adopt Western premises and notions.

In *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity*, Watt argues that the traditional Islamic world view, which still permeates every aspect of the Muslim world, is incompatible with the conditions and demands of modernity. Watt begins with the naive assumption that the modern Muslim mind is still determined by the epistemological rules of the early phase of Islam—what Muhammad Arkoun might call the Classical Islamic phase. Nowhere does Watt mention the historical and adaptive nature of the Shari'ah and the divergent opinions held by different Muslim scholars on matters relating to social and economic needs, historical change, and intellectual proclivities.

Watt, who is considered to be one of the most renowned authorities on Islam in the West, offers us a quasi-theoretical reading of the subject. Although modernity is one of his key analytic concepts, he does not advance a clear definition of what modernity is, nor does he adequately portray the dynamics of Western hegemony over the Muslim world and the current consequences.

Watt contends that the traditional Islamic outlook, which was formed in the early phase of Islam against the background of the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as consensus, is based on the following premises: 1) the unchangingness of the world; 2) the finality and superiority of Islam, and 3) the idealization of Muhammad as the perfect model that Muslims have to follow. In reconstructing the epistemological foundations of this outlook, Watt argues

that there is no place in Muslim thinking for development, social and economic progress, and advancement. Furthermore, he contends that "apart from the particular dangers inherent in the idealization of early Islam, there is a general danger, namely, that the community becomes so obsessed with recreating something past that it fails to see and deal with the real challenges and problems of the present" (p. 22).

It is clear that Watt treats the complex and rich history of Islamic epistemology in a monolithic fashion. He is far less successful in his attempt at the reconstruction of the Islamic theory of knowledge than, let us say, both Fazlur Rahman and Muhammad Arkoun, to whom he refers very often.

Watt extends the same approach to what he terms "Islamic fundamentalism." For instance, he considers Islamic resurgence to be the natural extension of the 'ulama's desire to enhance their power and social prestige (p. 43). This attitude highly misrepresents the nature of the growth and formation of the modern Islamic movements, which should be understood as a reaction to the Western colonization of the Muslim world. Although he declares that one of the great evils of the present day is "the unscrupulous exploitation of the Third World by Western multi-national corporations" (p. 102), he does not show how this exploitation has affected the formation of the Islamic movements.

The profiles of both Banna and Maudoodi, as the founders of the two main Islamic movements in the Muslim world, show clearly that they were dissatisfied with the performance of the 'ulama and their concomitant failure to translate Islam from a scholastic theory and a belief system to a program of socio-economic, educational, and political action.

Watt's emphasis on the conflict between Islam and modernity is highlighted by his failure to grasp the true nature of Islamic epistemology and its successive transformation through the system of the Shari'ah. Because of this, Watt reaches unrealistic conclusions. He argues that the traditional Islamic image "is making it difficult for Muslims to adjust adequately to life at the end of the twentieth century" (p.71). He also believes that Muslims are in need of reconstruction of the intellectual bases of the Islamic world view.

In conclusion, Watt fails to integrate the historical reality of Western exploitation of the Muslim world into a coherent system of analysis. At times, his treatment of the subject takes a highly descriptive form lacking a dynamic reflection on the processes of modern history. Furthermore, Watt's approach is based on the notion of the superiority of Western culture over the Islamic one. It is time that Muslim thinkers take a critical stand toward the legacy of the West, Westernization, and modernization in the Muslim world.

Youssef's *Revolt Against Modernity* follows, generally, the same theme, emphasizing the socio-historical and theological bases of the Egyptian Jihad movement. This book is much less coherent and weaker in content than Watt's.

In discussing the nature of the interaction between Islam and society and the modern Muslim world, Youssef observes that "in the process of asserting and affirming their independence, many of these (Muslim) nations have reached into the reservoir of their past in order to attempt to retrieve 'archaic' elements of their heritage; often they have displayed these elements in an exaggerated way" (p. 1). This statement reduces the complex reality of the contemporary Muslim world into a matter of a past existence.

Because of the author's lack of a balanced and well-founded academic approach, he uses the concept of jihad as the main paradigm in the study of Islam and its current manifestations in the Muslim world. In following this view of Islam, which is one-sided, reductionist, and often misrepresented, the author strongly believes that Muslims are out there to declare jihad on the world. According to Youssef, "the goal of world domination through jihad has embarrassed moderate and secular Muslims, yet today it is precisely the language of the modern Islamic revivalists" (p. 12). He turns the victim into an oppressor. It is clear that Muslims, who have long been victimized by all sorts of external power, have not yet had the chance to build an independent entity of their own.

Youssef, who claims to follow a sound sociological and historical method, fails to show that colonialism, which manifests itself in the form of present-day Israel, is the natural extension of the Western presence in the Muslim world. His understanding of the dynamics of the British mandate over Palestine is only partial: Palestine was an anomaly. Its Jewish and Arab populations were the most sophisticated and culturally developed in the area. Conflict between Jewish and Arab nationalism, however, frustrated all British attempts to encourage local government" (p. 37). There is no mention of the Colonial nature of the Jewish settlements under the auspices of the British; neither is there any factual analysis of the foundation of Israel and the subsequent disintegration and destruction of Palestinian society that resulted in the dispersal of Palestinians. Because of this ill-founded approach, the author considers Israel to be the victim of the Islamic notion of jihad. He maintains that "al-Jihad (movement) now and the Muslim Brethren before them have repeatedly sworn that there can be no peace with Israel" (p. 40).

In treating the volatile state-religion relationship in Egypt in the 1970's, the following factors have to be given consideration: 1) the conflict between Arab nationalism and Islam under Nasser; 2) the 1967 defeat and its cultural and religious consequences; 3) the coming of Sadat to power in 1970 and the decline of Nasserism; 4) the open door policy and its economic and cultural impact on Egyptian society, and 5) the cultural and religious policies of Sadat, and how religion was, in effect, subordinated to these policies. It is only in this context that we can study the Jihad movement in Egypt. The Jihad's inevitable clash with the regime was due to the uneasy relationship between

Islam and society and the frustration that had accumulated over the years, aggravated, of course, by the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

To sum up, a comprehensive and balanced approach to study the different aspects of the relationship between Islam and society in the Muslim world, Islam and politics, and Islam and Westernization, is urgently needed. The current Orientalist discourse on the subject, as represented by both Watt and Youssef, fails to adequately portray, analyze, and critique these tendencies.

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