



Reviews: Encounters with Islam

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Bassam Tibi,

Islam's Predicament with Modernity: Religious Reform and Cultural Change,

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Keywords

Cultural change, globalization, Islamism, modernity, sociology of religion

Depictive of much symbolic profundity, the 9/11 event represents the peak of a cumulative epidemic of tensions between a highly politicized and essentialized Islam vis-a-vis the western civilization that has long been accused of unjustly 'othering' it. To a large extent, the 9/11 crisis had a catalytic role in amplifying provocative questions about the purportedly inherent and recalcitrant contradictions within Islam as it confronts its problems with modernity, cultural change and secularism where western civilization is literally at the pinnacle of power. These predicaments linger not only among western and non-western policy communities, but also within the academic domain of the social sciences. But even before the 'crisis' in 2001, discussions already existed about political Islam and the eventual creation of a universal Islamist state as a project that is bound to fail. These discourses are imbricated with a diversity of understandings and perspectives within the global Islamic community about the role of their religion in a highly interdependent, globalized world; in other words, these deep conflicts are brought forth by the plethora of encounters between Islam and non-Islamic 'others' (see Rahman, 1984; Roy, 1996).

Bassam Tibi's *Islam's Predicament with Modernity* ambitiously and courageously challenges the wisdom of invoking 'essentialized' Islam as inherently irreconcilable with modernity. By putting up a strong case against the futile blame games being advanced by the parochial Islamists against the West, Tibi powerfully argues that Islam, like any other major world religious-civilizational grouping, should not be essentialized as if it is ahistorical and intrinsically resistant to reform and to adapting effectively to the problems posed by the contextual specificities of time and space. Stated in a nutshell, there is hope amid all the looming hopelessness.

The book starts with a highly provocative assumption: Islam has to reform itself amid its deep problems and disputations with modernity. Positing with much vigour that this is an achievable project, Tibi has audaciously conceded the problems that exist in this

complex nexus of Islam and modernity – that is, an intricate cluster of arguments and diagnoses of problems about this civilization's encounters with modernity. *Islam's Predicament with Modernity* has already recognized the dilemma with Islamism vis-à-vis cultural modernity – a realization which is also the elephant in the room that quite a few in the social sciences, out of naive political correctness, are willing to acknowledge vociferously.

With a seemingly rancorous antipathy against the guileless belief in the *homo Islamicus*, Tibi recognizes the inertia within Islam towards a revolutionary paradigm shift, and ultimately dismisses the palpability and the normative good of founding one's understanding of human rights upon Islamic cultural foundations – even if you are a Muslim. Needless to say, this book concedes that the idea among Islamists to restrict societies solely to cultural, political and religious practices based on Islam is at best the lamentable strategy of a pathetic 'defensive-cultural apologetics' based on the Islamists' 'self-congratulating assurance' that Islam is the only legitimate and best source of all knowledge, law and human rights (p. 28). This shrewd approach, according to Tibi, is a pointless method of resuscitating the Islamic world from underdevelopment or even reviving a cultural renaissance within its territories. Hence, what makes Tibi's argument novel is that the eschatological salvation of an ill-reputed Islam amid its conflict-ridden encounters with the West and cultural modernity can only be solved through internal self-realization within the Islamic world.

Consequently, in a fairly innovative way of framing the discursive link between religion and conflict in global politics, Tibi contends that Islam's indolence in adapting to cultural modernity can serve as an explanatory narrative that elucidates the blurriness of complexity brought by violence-prone mobilizations of what he calls a 'jihadization of jihad' and a 'sharia'atization of shari'a'. Contrary to the totalitarian and extremely parochial views of Islamism and Salafism, Civil Islam should be deemed the most effective panacea that will peacefully link the Islamic world and the greener pastures of western modernity. This ultimately requires, first and foremost, a humble yet honest acknowledgement of the fundamental frailties of Islamism and Salafism – or the closed-mindedness of certain perspectives of Islam's place in the midst of globalization – and a steadfast commitment to religious reform and cultural change. Affirming that cultural modernity is definitively secular while implying that the invocation of 'Islamic modernity' is meaningless, Tibi maintains that secularization and pluralism are the paths through which societies with a Muslim majority should normatively adopt.

Notwithstanding this view, highly unpopular especially in the Arab-Islamic world, Tibi emphasizes the need to revive 'Averroist' thinking in which two autonomous domains are postulated: the domain of religious and spiritual life through which Islamic religion can be vigorously realized, and the other sphere in which reason and philosophical knowledge are at the helm. In so doing, the book insinuates the inherent authenticity of an undertaking in which Islamic civilization's history of ideas has several traces of philosophical and secular rationalist underpinnings, despite the blatant and boorish denial by blind-eyed Islamists and Salafists.

Additionally, while taking into account the technological and cultural backwardness evident in many societies in the Islamic world, Tibi still asserts the optimistic view that Islam 'is in a position to engage in cross-cultural fertilization' (p. 31), but does issue a caveat that such an undertaking should not be seen as a total embrace of westernization.

Indeed, the quest for innovation, cultural development and a comprehensive religious paradigm shift can still be attained in rational yet imaginative Islamic terms. Thus, rationalism, the thirst for philosophical knowledge and scientific innovation are indispensable components of any modern society, and more importantly these are not new to Islam as is shown by its great thinkers of the past such as Averroes and Ibn Rushd, among many others. These suppressed Islamic rationalist thoughts of the glorious medieval Islam need to be unearthed and resurrected after being repressed and eventually murdered by the Islamists and Salafists.

One has to underscore Tibi's humble invocation of the need for certain sectors of the Islamic world to immediately start a paradigm shift: particularly for the Islamists and those with a penchant for 'semi-modernity' – a seemingly ironic perspective among those within quite a substantive majority of the Islamic world. More particularly, they try to adopt innovations in science and technology, yet maintain a strong, disparaging stance against the paradigmatic foundations of these advancements; specifically, the values and worldviews of cultural modernity. Hence, the most important prognosis is that the adoption of the instrumentalities of modernity has to be supported wholeheartedly by a paradigmatic-cognitive embrace of cultural modernity and universal reason as well.

In the broader realm of social science research, this book brings into the limelight the contentious yet compelling questions about the normative relationship between state and religion amid the enormous pressures exerted by the globalization of politics, culture and economics. Tibi's rich characterization of the failures of contemporary Islam to adapt to cultural modernity has several profound ramifications. As such, it emphasizes how modernity and development can necessarily be achieved by institutionalizing a state which acts as a formidable embodiment of human rights, collective public interests and economic development – a state that recognizes and actualizes political equality among its citizenry regardless of race, religion and sex, among others. Thus, cultural modernity traverses beyond civilizational boundaries – so to speak; the idea of distinctive spheres between universal philosophical-rational knowledge and religious belief has to be clearly realized among traditional and underdeveloped societies who remain disillusioned by the harsh memories of western colonialism. This means that the only way to move forward for underdeveloped societies with Muslim majorities is for them to have this much-needed profound internalization both at the micro- and macro-social levels: the distinction between faith and reason through which modernity and development can be unleashed. The illuminating examples of Japan and the East Asian tigers, and more recently perhaps the case of China, clearly depict how massive economic development brought about by rational, secular, philosophical knowledge through science and technology can harmoniously coexist, to a large extent, with the distinctive cultural preserves of tradition and civilization (see Jacques, 2009: 46–69, 414–35; Morishima, 1982; Yoshino, 1992). Therefore, examples of recent history share one deep insight: traditional-cultural authenticity can be maintained even with a wholesale confidence and usage of universal reason brought about by cultural modernity.

Finally, *Islam's Predicament with Modernity* is a *tour de force*. It is a highly provocative book written by a highly accomplished scholar of European Islam and political science whose commendably fresh insights ultimately raise the level of the debate on the indispensable need to depoliticize religion – a necessary step to effectively address the very heart of the core conflicts in global politics. It offers a balanced analysis

as evidence of excellent social science scholarship, devoid of any naive political correctness; dismisses the futility of the blame-games posed by the Islamists; and more importantly, reframes the debate by sketching a framework in which better prospects for Islam vis-à-vis cultural modernity and the globalized world can best be achieved.

This is, without doubt, one of the best and most serious studies of contemporary Islam and its rightful place in the complex stream of challenges of modernity. Its publication comes at a time when social science research dealing with political Islam is often beset with banality, naivety and a lack of contextual sympathy to the objects of the study. Needless to say, it is with much faith that the arguments put forward by Bassam Tibi resonate not only within the ivory towers of western social sciences, but also, more importantly, through the wide geographic expanse of global politics, particularly in those societies still beset with conflicts largely brought about by pre-modern foolishness about distinguishing reason and faith both at the individual and macro-social levels.

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Erik Bleich (ed.),

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Integration, Islam in Europe and the USA, political science, security, terrorism

In this book, Erik Bleich has brought together a set of papers, mostly written from the perspective of political science. The authors aim to analyse dynamic relationships between Muslim minorities and western liberal democracies in the light of security concerns. Apart from one comparative article by the editor, who compares the policy approaches of six