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Review

Islamism and Islam

Bassam Tibi. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012.
242pp.

Dale Stover^{*}

This book offers a concerted effort to provide a comprehensive and unmistakable definition for Islamism, whereas the other term in the title, Islam, is simply what is traditional or classical or taken for granted since little attention is given to defining it. The author lays out six features he considers to be characteristic elements of those contemporary Muslim movements associated with extremist beliefs and behaviors. A separate chapter is devoted to each of these six features of Islamism. They are described by the author in the preface as “its deeply reactionary vision of the world political order, its embrace of genocidal antisemitism, its predicament with democracy, its use of violence, the shari’atization of law, and its search for authenticity within an Islamic tradition it has largely reinvented out of an obsessive desire for purity” (xiii). However, as the author lays out his case for the six descriptors of what he labels “Islamism,” it becomes evident that all of the six features have definitional boundaries that are problematic.

One aspect of the tension in the author’s definition of Islamism derives from his claiming on the one hand that “political, economic, and social concerns are articulated in terms of religious claims, thus heralding what I (Bassam Tibi) have termed the religionization of politics,” while on the other hand, he insists that “Islamism is based on

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a real religious faith and a genuine conception of the divine. Thus the religious pronouncements of Islamists, . . . do not reflect a purely instrumental use of religion” (35). While trying to demonstrate that Islamism and Islam refer to quite different realities, the author nevertheless confesses that “Islamists view themselves as true believers—and thus, in the most important sense, they are” (35).

The author attempts to explain Islamism as a totalitarian response to a particular crisis. “In the case of Islamism, the crisis arose from a failure of development in relation to the much more powerful West, a failure of both modernism and liberalism to strike roots in the Islamic world” (36). This extraordinarily weak explanation betrays the Orientalism of the author. How does he expect “modernism and liberalism to strike roots in the Islamic world” when Western powers have been maintaining a brutal colonial hegemony over that Islamic world? It would seem the author sorely lacks an understanding of the process of decolonization which may require more than one generation of cultural rehabilitation to repair the damages wreaked upon a colonized people. I speak of the author’s Orientalism precisely because he rejects Edward Said’s use of the term to make evident the cultural arrogance of European scholars in assuming the intellectual and cultural superiority of Western discourse as they diagnosed and advised concerning what was best for colonized peoples. Though the author describes himself as a “devout Muslim,” he also makes clear that his intellectual mentors and system of values is indelibly European, and he demonstrates little empathy for the real circumstances of colonized peoples as he describes Islamism as having a “deeply reactionary vision of the world political order.”

Our author frets the Islamist rejection of democracy as the path to genuine governance which he equates with the practice of contemporary European states. He warns that some Islamist groups may endorse democratic voting as a means to achieve political control, but this will not lead to the pluralism permitted in a modern European secular state. He cites multiple times the critical role of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 in establishing a separation of political governance from religious hegemony, resulting in a political system of state sovereignty, a secular social order, and religious pluralism, a combination which he views as a universal good. The author does not address the case of the State of Israel which has what appears to be a democratic form of government, but was established as an explicitly Jewish state that by law privileges Jews over non-Jews in a variety of ways. Could he say that Israel has a genuinely secular social order and

genuine religious pluralism? State sovereignty in the author's Westphalian model is an idealized or essentialized notion on the part of the author that may not correspond to the practice of actual states, as for example in the era of European imperial expansion and colonization, or as with the various state alliances formed in WWI, WWII, and in the Cold War era. Still, the author is right to note that Islamists do reject this model, though he has trouble empathizing with their reasons.

The author notes that Islamists view democracy, secularism, and religious pluralism as cultural imports by the colonizing Western powers, which taints them as practices of the oppressor. Choosing to reject them and to reclaim their cultural and religious "purity," is described by the author as "inventing traditions" which turn out to be totalitarian and revolutionary social and political forms. One could suppose that Islamists are in this way imitating the colonial powers, having internalized the ethics of the colonizers. Our author does not suggest this, since he only sees European cultural and political forms as admirable and having universally beneficial effects.

What the author does do is look at Islamic traditional history and note that what he terms "an Islamic 'Enlightenment'" was at one time present, and that "the classical heritage of Islam contained the seeds of an Enlightenment that resembles European cultural modernity" (185). Alas, he notes that "the seeds of this rationalism were suppressed by the *fiqh* orthodoxy," but "deserve to be revived" (185). He is excited by this notion and suggests it as a far more excellent route for Islamists to take, although he admits that "it runs counter to any purification" (186).

The author acknowledges a split in Islamic tradition between the philosophers and the jurists, between "*falsafa* (rationalism) as opposed to the *fiqh* (orthodoxy)" (111). He considers himself to be an Averroist, identifying with the *falsafa* rather than *fiqh*, which is the scholarly effort to interpret Islamic law, *shari'a*, in accordance with the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. It is *shari'a* which claims the attention of the Islamists as they strive to reclaim their cultural and religious identity and shuck off the imports of the West. Islamists cannot fathom how the author can claim to be a "devout Muslim" while also admiring the European cultural and political world, whose Enlightenment he sees as a breakthrough for human reason tapping into universal meanings. Are the Europeans so admirable in their Enlightenment if it leads them to become brutalizing colonizers of other peoples?

That brings us to what the author calls the shari'atization of law by Islamism, which means to the matter of fiqh. The reader already knows that the author is an admirer of Western constitutional law and that he is indifferent about the traditional Islamic focus on fiqh, the scholarly effort to ascertain legal rulings on the basis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, which rulings constitute shari'a. Within Sunni Islam there developed four schools (madhahib) of fiqh or legal interpretation, and each of the four were considered authoritative in relation to particular geographic regions of Sunni Islam. There were, however, clear differences in specific legal interpretations among these four schools, and there has never been an integrated system of shari'a embracing all of the four schools. Colonialism introduced Western legal traditions into colonial governance and shari'a became limited to matters of ritual and family law. In its ambition to throw off the oppressive weight of colonialism, Islamism aims to replace all Western law with a re-instatement of shari'a. Since shari'a never functioned in the way Islamism now envisions it to function, the author notes that this is solved by "inventing" a shari'a to accomplish their goal, claiming shari'a as the law of God which is not contestable since it represents divine rule over this world. The author rightly notes that this shari'atization of law becomes totalitarian—it is no longer a product of traditional fiqh, but of inventive assertion by political actors.

What the author does not consider is how Islamist thinking arrives at this choice of shari'atization and whether it is truly totalitarian in each instance. For example, the author targets Sayyid Qutb, calling him "the rector spiritus of Islamism" (xi). The author justly tracks all of the key characteristics of Islamism to Qutb. Yet, Qutb's biographer, John Calvert, claims that Qutb's influential book, *Social Justice in Islam*, was influenced by the example of Muhammad 'Abduh, the liberal reformist Grand Mufti of Egypt, who sought to accommodate Islam "to the requirements of global modernity" (Calvert 2010: 137). "Like the reformers," Calvert claims, "Qutb interpreted Islam as a rational, practical and scientifically sound religion that was in accord with human nature. Thus, he adopted from the *usul al-fiqh* the juridical concept of the general interest of the community (*al-maslaha al-'amma*) and like 'Abduh, he applied it in a way that called to mind the utilitarian thinking fashionable in Europe" (ibid., 137–38).

Nevertheless, Calvert notes, at a later point, Qutb "reacted to the reversal of Muslim fortunes in a way that bred a sense of distance from the West rather than accommodation with the foundations of its civilization. In Qutb's view, . . . far from

being a benevolent mentor to Muslim peoples, the West and its domestic agents were adversaries intent on political and cultural conquest of the Islamic world” (ibid., 138). This provides a more nuanced understanding than that offered by the author of how Qutb, having experienced persecution, imprisonment, and impending execution by the Nasser government, arrived at the endorsement of shari’atization for Islamism.

For most of Islamic history, both Jews and Christians were considered “Peoples of the Book” who were given protected status, despite treasonous behavior on the part of Jewish tribes belonging to the community of Medina which had pledged loyalty to the civil leadership of Muhammad in 622 A.D. The author charges Islamism with inventing a history that portrays Jews as the perennial enemies of Muslims ever since 622 A.D. Sayyid Qutb is cited as describing the conflict between Muslims and Jews in terms of “a cosmic war,” though it is largely fought, Qutb says, as “a war of ideas” (64). Moreover, Islamists maintain that Jews and Christians are collaborators in the war against Islam. According to Qutb, “the Jews were the instigator from the very first moment. The Crusaders (Christians) followed next” (66). The author holds that Islamists construe their antisemitism to coincide with anti-Westernism, so that Islamists believe that Jews also “rule the United States indirectly from their strongholds on New York’s Wall Street” (67).

That antisemitism has infected Islamists like a dreadful virus cannot be disputed, and the author laments this development while criticizing the poor treatment shown Muslim immigrants in Europe. What he does not do is to recognize the historical facts of favors done for Jews by the Western nations at the expense of Muslims. The Balfour Declaration became one of these facts on 31 October 1917, when the British Cabinet announced that “His Majesty’s Government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish People.” Sir Herbert Samuel, Postmaster General, who was a member of that cabinet, was the first Jewish person to sit in a British cabinet. In January 1915, he sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister proposing that Palestine should become a British protectorate because it was of strategic importance to the British Empire and urging a large-scale Jewish settlement there. By October 1917, David Lloyd George had become the Prime Minister and he authorized Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to issue the Balfour Declaration. This was done without consultation with the largely Muslim residents of Palestine. What mattered to the British was their Empire and the Balfour Declaration advanced the interests of that Empire.

After WWII, the British wanted out of Palestine and they asked the United Nations to resolve the future of Palestine. The UN supported a partition of Palestine between a Jewish state and an Arab state. In a pre-emptive move, the new State of Israel was proclaimed by a Provisional Government on 14 May 1948, and on that same day President Harry Truman of the United States, presumably viewing the new state as an ally in the developing Cold War with the USSR, officially recognized the new Jewish state and its government. It would have been helpful for the author to make some reckoning of how Islamist antisemitism is related to Western intervention in bringing about a Jewish state in formerly Arab territory. Otherwise, he leaves us to assume that Islamism is simply irrational as well as immoral in promoting antisemitism.

The author addresses the Islamist use of violence as he tracks how classical jihad is transformed by Islamism into “modern jihadism.” Traditionally, jihad meant moral effort in following a true spiritual path. In some circumstances this could involve physical conflict in acts of self-defense. The author states that “long before Carl Clausewitz formulated his theory of war, Muslims abided by rules and a code of conduct that limited targets in line with humanitarian standards” (135). Surprisingly, the author argues that “violence is not inherent in Islamism, since the core concern is the order of the state and of the world” (135). Yet, he also claims that “jihadist violence is a variety of terrorism and therefore not consistent with the ethics of classical jihad” (156). The author laments that the West does not properly understand jihadist violence, since it should not be seen as merely acts of desperation or simply a version of irregular warfare, but is oriented around the goal of “de-Westernization of the world” and “international destabilization” (147–48). The major target of jihadism, the author claims, is “the order of the secular nation-state” (156). Put most succinctly by the author, “jihadism is a divine war, a ‘global jihad,’ in which violence is only an element” (142).

While the author provides the reader with useful insights regarding Islamist jihadism, he stops short of suggesting that Western colonization practices and the cultural and religious disparagement of Islamic peoples by certain forms of Orientalist discourse can represent another sort of violence which radically disordered the world of those colonized. In the midst of his discussion of Islamist violence, the author mentions an attempt by Pope Benedict in a lecture at Regensburg University on 12 September 2006 to raise the matter of violence as a problematic issue between Islam and the Christian West. The pope quoted the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus as saying “show me just

what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached” (137). Our author notes that “this is undeniably a clumsy way to raise any issue with the followers of the Prophet, especially when one represents the church that brought us the Crusades and the Inquisition. Still the underlying message was entirely reasonable: the pope wished to engage the Islamic world in a discussion of whether it is ever legitimate to use violence to spread faith. . . . The response, largely orchestrated by Islamists, was worldwide Muslim outrage” (137–38). The author goes on in the following paragraph to deplore that Muslims were unable to engage “in an honest dialogue” and he claims to “have no doubt that the pope’s intentions were benign” (138).

The author appears completely unaware that an *Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI* appeared in *Islamica Magazine* on 12 October 2006, signed by 38 Muslim notables, including nine grand muftis and one ayatollah. The Open Letter states, “while we applaud your efforts to oppose the dominance of positivism and materialism in human life, we must point out some errors in the way you mentioned Islam as a counterpoint to the proper use of reason, as well as some mistakes in the assertions you put forward in support of your argument.” This Open Letter which continued on for approximately three typescript pages, was in no way “clumsy.” It was a model of classical Islamic scholarship while also displaying all the sophistication of modern Western learning and scholarly courtesy—no hint of Islamism at any point. How is it that Bassam Tibi remained unaware of this Open Letter at the time of his book’s publication six years later? Had he become so focused on Islamism that he lost touch with Islam?

Such an impressively scripted Open Letter with so many signatures, appearing within exactly one month of the Pope’s lecture, could scarcely be imagined without the existence of a network of Muslim scholars and religious and political authorities drawn together in 2005 and 2006 by the project known as the Amman Message, so called because it was initiated in Jordan by that country’s king and religious scholars. At an international conference in Amman in July of 2005, 200 Islamic scholars from 50 countries convened and issued a ruling on three points with the effect of fundamentally undercutting Islamist practices. The “Three Points” of the Amman Message were subsequently endorsed by six other international assemblies of Islamic scholars so that over 500 leading Muslim scholars and religious authorities were in agreement. The

“Three Points” defined who is to be considered authentically Muslim, forbade the practice of takfir (naming someone an unbeliever) between Muslims, and established the subjective and objective preconditions for the issuing of legitimate fatwas (shari’a rulings).

While the Three Points of the Amman Message do not as such put an end to what our author labels as Islamism, they do represent a significant step by traditional Islam to mark out definitional boundaries making clear that Islam is not Islamism. The author deserves the readers’ thanks for his effort to bring to a fuller viewing those contemporary Islamist practices and understandings that do not conform to Islamic tradition and may merit a distinctive branding such as Islamism. Readers should also be advised to retain some misgivings about how sound one’s own perception of this so-called Islamism can be for those of us whose intellectual formation lies within the orbit of the colonizers. Bassam Tibi, in taking up this task as a Muslim, has put himself at risk of jihadi retribution, and we must admire his courage.

REFERENCES

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