

Tensions and Transitions in the Muslim World

Louay Safi

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This book belongs to the genre of studies attempting to extend and broaden Muslim channels of communication to “western” academic and intellectual circles in general, and to their American counterparts in particular. It starts from the conventional apologetic *premise* that Islam is misunderstood and, in many instances, mystified both by unrepresentative scholarly works on the one hand, and the dynamics of Muslim history and actions on the other. Marked differences between the historical, social, and political experiences of Muslims and Europeans, as reflected in different modes of organization and discourse, have put serious impediments in the way of mutual understanding across the cultural divide separating the two worlds.

One reflection of such distrust is manifested in the indifference shown by American scholars and statesmen toward what Safi designates as “Islamic reformists” and their forward-looking agenda. Despite the latter’s ambitions to advance a pluralist and democratic society in consonance with the modern world, the former continue to dismiss such claims as both “opportunistic” and insincere. These perceptions, according to the author, are driven by a strong sense of skepticism about the commensurability of Islamic values with modern western ideals as well as by vested American geostrategic interests.

Safi challenges such attitudes by emphasizing the importance and vital significance of *Islamic reform*, which he defines as the “middle ground and the moral synthesis between the nationalist-secularist and the moral-Islamist forces” at the heart of the unsettling tensions that inform socio-political transformations in the Arab and Islamic worlds (p. xii). Reform of this kind should be able to appropriate the universal elements of the historical Muslim experience in order to transcend the political and cultural institutions of classical and contemporary Muslim societies, and to bring about a creative synthesis of Islam and modernity (p. xi). Safi’s main contention

is that a culturally and legally reformed Islam would ultimately favor a political order based on democracy and pluralism (p. 4).

The nine chapters of the book, divided into four parts, proceed to elaborate on these themes of reform. Part 1 (two chapters) attempts to explore the possibilities of embedding a democratic state system as well as the corresponding political culture and structures in Islamic values and beliefs. Part 2 (three chapters) presents and examines the alternative visions of the rival secular nationalist and Islamic moral, social, and political dichotomies as well as the ensuing tensions between the two contending parties. Part 3 (three chapters) attempts to lay the grounds for a cross-cultural dialogue based on the common and intersubjective convergence of Islamic and western human rights values. This is considered the prerequisite for an evolving participatory and universal ethical system.

Finally, part 4 (one chapter) moves to the global plane and looks at Islamic-secular strains as manifested by tensions between the Muslim world and the “West.” This single chapter cautions against two main pitfalls: 1) considering or viewing disparate Islamic groups as a monolithic phenomenon and ignoring the liberating and progressive labors of Islamic reformers, and 2) the risks associated with an American foreign policy of imperial expansion and of supporting local autocratic regimes. The author argues that this may lead to empire at the expense of freedom, dignity, and the human rights of regional Muslim societies – the very values that the United States claims to uphold and pursue (pp. xii-xiii).

Despite this study’s genuine intentions, one is inclined to express some reservations about its main premise that Islam is misunderstood, and perhaps stress more the aspect of interest. The Islam currently being demonized and for which the author feels obliged to apologize is the same Islam that was hailed when it could be manipulated against Arab nationalist regimes and the communist bloc. American dealings with Islam have not necessarily been simply a function of degree of comprehension, but more so an outcome of policy and strategic means and ends. Endeavoring to present Islam in a favorable light, while laudable at least insofar as it may sway some pockets of public opinion, largely misses the point. Essentially, it does not matter. The proverbial story about the lamb and the wolf offers insights in this regard.

Another point worth mentioning relates to Safi’s search for a democratic, pluralistic system rooted in Islamic values. This search is far more complex than it appears to be at first glance. A democracy embedded in an Islamic value system would tend to metamorphose into *shura*, and from there on we face ontological and epistemological divergences between the

two concepts. Apparent procedural commonalities are very likely to give rise to serious substantive discord. An Islamic system is more than a mere American counterpart added to it in the name of God, the way a Muslim renders a slaughtered sheep lawful to eat by uttering the name of God upon it. Mechanisms cannot be separated from the values upholding them. Sociologist Andre Beteille implicitly alluded to such complexities when he insightfully observed:

Western societies were acquiring a new and comprehensive commitment to equality at precisely that juncture in their history when they were also developing in their fullest form the theory and practice of imperialism.” (Andre Beteille, *The Idea of Natural Inequality* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983], 4).

The author further states that he does not conceive of an “Islamic state” as an institution mainly concerned with the Muslim community’s interests. Rather, it should be perceived as a political system based on universal principles and bearing the interests of all its citizens in mind, irrespective of religious, ethnic, national, or gender differences (p. 10). What seems to be taking place here is a very subtle shift from religious principles to secular ethics. In addition, it is not clear why Safi creates a dichotomy between the interests of the Muslim community and those of the citizenry at large, instead of suggesting, for instance, that the interests of disparate citizens actually constitute a Muslim community’s interest for which the Islamic state is, first and foremost, responsible.

All being said, this book provides a lucid and well-articulated case for situating perceived tensions between the Islamic world and the “West” in perspective. In this respect, this commendable and sincere effort conveys an important point of view that deserves as much exposure as possible.

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