

Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World

Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'. *SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996, xii + 370 pp.

Most studies of Islamist resurgence have focused on specific aspects of the Islamist political agenda and have sought to identify their intellectual roots in the writings of thinkers from the medieval period of Islamic history. Influenced by Iran's Islamic revolution, these authors have been concerned primarily with political Islam. It is rare to find a book that seeks to establish modern Islamist thought within the context of western critical theory and indigenous political conditions, or that explains its ideas in light of a conflict between revolutionary discourse and state hegemony. Abu-Rabi's book is thus all the more welcome, as it establishes a basis for consideration of Islamist thinkers that will be an essential reference in the future.

The subject of this book is the thought of Sayyid Qutb, considered within the parameters of Islamic modernism, westernization, orientalism, and the contemporary Islamist response to these factors. Abu-Rabi' says he is undertaking an intellectual history of his subject, that of "a popular religious movement . . . founded by lay Muslim intellectuals" often at odds with the traditional political and religious elites. But he considers this question in light of the "question of continuity and discontinuity in modern Arab thought." Influenced by Foucault, he argues that the question of epistemological acts and thresholds, of conceptual ruptures in the development of ideas, must be countered by the reality of continuities in Islamic thought, by the fact of an ongoing Islamic discourse whose exposition may change according to historical circumstances but whose essence and focus of concern remain constant (pp. 5-6).

The idea of continuity and discontinuity is a valuable method for considering various themes in Arab thought, ranging from the liberal thinkers of the *nahdah* (renaissance) to both secular and religious Arab responses to the challenge of colonization and the question of how best could Arab-Islamic societies survive foreign occupation. Essential here is the question of Arab Muslim "decline," how and why it occurred, and how this decline may be reversed. Abu-Rabi' surveys a variety of Muslim thinkers to posit three approaches to the relevance of Islamic tradition to the resolution of the problem of decline: the rejection of tradition in favor of intellectual stimulus from the West; a conservative approach calling for the "revival of

the past" in a modern setting; and a middle ground seeking a reconciliation of western thought and the Islamic tradition (p. 40). A key for all strands of thought is the question of tradition, whether it should be rejected, used as the foundation for new departures, or exploited selectively.

This structure forms the basis for discussion of Sayyid Quṭb, following a survey of the thought of various thinkers who are identified with the *nahdah* and a more detailed consideration of the life and thought of Ḥasan al Bannā. Abu-Rabi', in three extensive chapters, examines "the Pre-Ikhwān Phase" of Quṭb's career and thought, Quṭb's writings and ideas between 1952-62, and finally "The Qur'anic Contents of Sayyid Quṭb's Thought." The touchstone of his analysis is the manner in which Quṭb viewed the Qur'an, leading to his extensive discussion and defense of Quṭb's Qur'anic exegesis, *Fī Zilāl al Qur'ān*, which the author regards as "magnificent."

In Abu Rabi's view, Quṭb moved from an aesthetic appreciation of the Qur'an to the belief that it formed the foundation of Islamic thought, ethics, and social practice. The major transitional work in this progression was *Social Justice in Islam*, which signified an ideological shift in his approach to Egypt and to Islam generally. Here Abu-Rabi' brings in his concern with the role of intellectuals in society, arguing that Quṭb can be considered an "organic intellectual" in Gramscian terms, identifying with his peasant background while articulating grievances that could attract the attention of those from other milieus. Quṭb defended Islamic tradition and sought to reestablish bonds between contemporary society and the formative Islamic period when faith and practice were one, unhindered by the mediation of a religious hierarchy. This last stipulation reflected Quṭb's and al Bannā's distrust of al Azhar and ulama generally as agents of the state rather than of Islam.

Quṭb's life clearly changed with the publication of *Social Justice in Islam*. Although situated in his "pre-Ikhwān phase," it revealed a concern for the fate of the Muslim masses, ignored by western exploitative political and economic systems, that would remain and intensify for the rest of his life. As Abu-Rabi' makes clear, Quṭb's thought developed with specific reference to his own historical-social experience. He argues, against most other scholars, however, that Quṭb's ideas were essentially the result of his own approach to the Qur'an and his response to social crisis, not a product of his reading of other thinkers such as Ibn Taymiyah or Mawduḍī. This assertion is difficult to prove or refute. It is a strength of this book that Abu-Rabi' situates Quṭb's thought as a product of his own internal intellectual journey in response to the pressure of external crises in Egyptian politics and society, but the possibility of external influences derived from other writers is usually rejected rather than investigated. This approach reflects the author's vision of Quṭb as a unique thinker, but it tends to isolate Quṭb from the intellectual world of Islamic thought, with which he was undoubtedly familiar.

The touchstone of Quṭb's life was his imprisonment during the Nasser years, during which he wrote *Milestones* and *Fī Zilāl al Qur'ān*. Abu-Rabi' defends Quṭb against the charges of such scholars as Emmanuel Sivan that his Qur'anic exegesis was unoriginal and rejected modernity. In contrast,

Abu-Rabi' mounts a powerful argument defending the originality of Qutb's ideas. He contends further that Qutb's rejection of Arab nationalism and his thesis that the Qur'an formed the only logical basis for reestablishing a truly Islamic society was apt; only then could Islam confront and engage modernity, if only to destroy that modernity that Qutb depicted as *jāhiliyah*.

Abu-Rabi' stresses Qutb's commitment to *ijtihād* as the basis of a "dynamic *fiqh*," using the bases of Islamic thought and belief to both reject constructs based on Islamic philosophy and those reflecting western intellectual models; Islam should rely on what Abu-Rabi' calls a new theology that has major ideological implications for Islamic society. Here also Abu-Rabi' engages the question of *jihad*, acknowledging Qutb's debt to Mawdudi, as a means of defending true Islam as a revolutionary faith-ideology (*'aqīdah*). Beyond this, however, *jihad* is "a call for an international social revolution" (p. 195) enabling the spread of Islam, which is the sole means of human liberation globally, not only in the Islamic world.

Abu-Rabi' concludes his book with a discussion of what he calls an "Islamic Liberation Theology," the thought of the Shi'i thinker Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh. He sees Faḍl Allāh as being influenced by Fanon and Marx as well as by Khomeini, Shari'ati, al Bannā, and Qutb. Confronted by the problem of state disintegration in Lebanon, Faḍl Allāh differs from the *Ikhwān* in that he sees the committed ulama as the basis of Islamic revival, not its obstacle. He also calls for an individualistic Islamic resurgence where necessary, in contrast to Qutb's call for an Islamic state, and he appreciates the value of elements of western civilization that should be investigated and understood, again in contrast to Qutb.

Abu-Rabi' then returns to the question of continuities and ruptures in Islamic thought. Islam today is central to the discourse of secularists as well as religious thinkers, the result of the crisis of the nation-state in the Arab-Islamic world that preexisted but was accentuated by the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel. He does not pursue the implication of this analysis, which suggests, as does his discussion of Faḍl Allāh's thought, that a continued Islamic resurgence contains within it the seeds of *jihad* against Israel, a war that Faḍl Allāh believes is justified further by the 1993 Israel-PLO accord.

Abu-Rabi' has written a major study. One hopes that it will encourage scholars to engage Islamic thinkers who confront their own environments and western civilization with the same respect they would give western intellectuals who, in the past, have challenged the traditional bases of the European social order. In order to accomplish this task, however, scholars must accept the fact that Islamism responds to the West as a threatening civilization whose past includes imperial expansion and conquest. West-centric scholars will not wish to do this.

Abu-Rabi' has undertaken this task not to extract Qutb from his Egyptian-Islamic milieu but rather to establish Qutb's intellectual effort at a level comparable to that identified with western thinkers. All are products of their societies and their times, positing solutions to perceived crisis that

they view in metahistorical terms, but in ways that indicate their being situated in specific times and places. In the process, he seems to identify, officially, with Qutb rather than to maintain distance while analyzing his thought.

Abu-Rabi's book commands our respect and attention as much for the intellectual framework proposed as for his intensive analysis of Qutbian thought. He is correct to argue that Qutb strove to embrace modernity, albeit in a manner suitable to his own vision of true Islam. Whether Qutb's Qur'anic exegesis will become the foundation of this Islamic modernity remains open to question. Likewise, several matters remain unresolved or unengaged, such as how representative was Qutb of Ikhwānist thought? Abu-Rabi' suggests he was the Ikhwān's major spokesman, but his own evidence, especially the views of Ḥasan Hudaybī who succeeded al Bannā as the ikwān's leader, indicates that the Ikhwān leadership viewed Qutb as an extremist, a unique thinker rather than one they embraced. Likewise, the definition of the intellectual remains problematic. Due to his vocation, al Bannā was led to address and to engage the masses directly; Qutb's circumstances and temperament suggest that he would have written in isolation from them, even while expressing concern for their fate. *Social Justice in Islam*, written in Qutb's pre-Ikhwān phase, appears to be more representative of mainstream Ikhwanist thought than his later writings, especially his ultimate condemnation of contemporary Islamic society as *jāhiliyah*.

A final question, outside the concern of this book as an intellectual history but relevant to Qutb's own vision of the future, is what type of society would emerge if led by people who followed Qutb? Would the exercise of creative *ijtihād* be extended to the many or restricted to the few? Would this few be an elite who spoke in the name of the people while suppressing disagreement in the name of Islam, or would a broader debated be tolerated? Qutb's prison experience, as the touchstone of his later writings, suggests a penchant for autocracy coupled with a determination to conquer the non-Muslim world in the name of Islamic justice and egalitarianism, demanding the right to proselytize but withholding that right from those who would oppose Islam. This aspect of *jihad* is alluded to but not elaborated upon in this book. It is one facet of Qutb's thought, along with his vision of modern *jāhiliyah*, that other Islamist thinkers have criticized, a fact often ignored by western scholars who have tended to generalize Islamism from his writings.

It is to Abu-Rabi's credit that he calls attention to these disagreements within contemporary Islamist thought. Qutb's life and writings may serve ultimately to engage Islamist intellectuals in dialogues where disparate approaches and responses to the question of what is an Islamic society will be tolerated. This would not be Qutb's preference, but it reminds us of the plurality of views existing within the Islamist spectrum. All may agree on "resurgence" as the means to self and social Muslim reassertion against foreign encroachment, but the nature of that resurgence and its impact on the

state remain open to interpretation, one final distinction that places us in Abu-Rabi's debt.

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Book Reviews

The Social Structure in the Early Islamic Empire: A Reinterpretation of Qur'anic Law and Umayyad Administration

Mustafa Abd al-Qadir, *1957*. Translated by
John Watt, 1962. Pp. 213.

THE *Qur'anic* Law, the 1957 work of an Egyptian scholar of Islamic law, is a study of the social structure of the early Islamic Empire. The author, Mustafa Abd al-Qadir, is a leading authority on the subject. His work is a valuable contribution to the study of the social structure of the early Islamic Empire. The book is written in a clear and concise style, and is accessible to a wide range of readers. The author's argument is based on a detailed study of the Qur'anic text, and is supported by a wealth of evidence. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of the social structure of the early Islamic Empire, and is a must-read for anyone interested in the subject.

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