

### Book Review

## **The Challenge of Modernity: The Quest for Authenticity in the Arab World**

*Louay M. Safi. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994, pp. 211.*

The question of modernization in the Arab world remains an inexhaustible subject for debate precisely because it has not yet been resolved. This inconclusive outcome continues to put the issue at the heart of concerns in these lands. The Arab world is in turmoil: its political elites are divided and at war with each other, social and economic problems continue to affect and trouble the masses, basic democratic rights are still a dream. In short, things are not at all well.

The acute awareness of this problem dates back to the setbacks suffered by the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century. Intellectuals have since been trying to diagnose and offer solutions for the ailment. In trying to contribute to the debate, Safi thus joins an illustrious line of "doctors" from Khayr al Dīn al Tūnisī through al Afghānī and down to Malīk Bennabi and Ḥassan Ḥanafī, to mention but a few of the valiant souls who attempted to rise up to the challenge.

Safi's approach departs from the right point. He tries to synthesize western and Arab views on the modernization and to keep his discussion as "scientific" as possible. But he makes no secret of his "ideological" commitment, based on a conception of modernization as a "rationalization process, i.e., an emancipatory project, aiming at eliminating the supersti-

tious and irrational elements of culture." With such an attitude, it is no surprise that he rejects the Marxist approach to modernization in favor of the Weberian orthodoxy currently dominant in western universities.

Nevertheless, the author is aware of some basic contradictions in this orthodoxy, namely, its tendency to fall back on a purely Marxian position to analyze nonwestern societies. In such an analysis, the cultural dimension of these societies are completely neglected and only economic reasoning dominates. Safi concludes by pointing to the "Weberian paradox," meaning that the progressive rationalization of society leads to its fragmentation and the subsequent loss of an overall meaning in life.

This compartmentalization of life into separate spheres, each the concern of a particular discipline, deprives life of the overall significance provided in the past by religion. Rationalization also brings a loss of freedom through the progressive bureaucratization of social functions. This fragmentation, also referred to as the "eclipse of substantive reason," makes the western experience of modernization irrelevant to the Third World, since it does not present those who want to replicate this experience with a constitutive principle to orient the desired change. As a matter of fact, the western modernization experience is incapable of self-regeneration, and collapses into fragmentation and nihilism.

In order for nonwestern communities to confront their own challenge of modernization, they have to fall back on their own values and history. For change to occur, there must be first a recognition of the problem of disorder, then a critical examination of the heritage to reinterpret it in relevant terms. This is a task for the individual whom Safi, following Foucault, calls the "universal intellectual," the committed, principled man of ideas, who can lend his moral authority to new interpretations and could engineer a consensus around them.

In the second part, Safi attempts to test his theoretical model of modernization on the particular conditions in the Arab world. He examines briefly the Arab encounter with modernity, discussing the various reactions to the shock of the encounter with the West and the realization of its material and organizational superiority as it crystallized in the ideas of selected thinkers and movements. What united all of these early thinkers, from al Ṭaḥṭawī and al Afghānī to al Kawākibī and al Hueari, was their revolt against traditionalism and of blaming old ideas and ways for the predicaments of the modern-day Arabs. But while they agreed on condemning the present, their prescriptions for a cure differed. 'Abduh and al Afghānī called for a reformulation of Islamic thought without abandoning orthodoxy, while al Ṭaḥṭawī advocated the adoption of western ways, at least in part, and al Kawākibī called for a liberal Arab nationalism. This set the stage for the subsequent division of Arab society into two major antagonistic blocs: the liberal nationalist and the Islamic. Each distrusted the other, and they barely communicated. The subsequent conflict that started between the two blocs in Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s was thus inevitable.

By the late 1950s, as the modernization process in the Arab world entered its second phase, the supporters of westernization had attained

dominance in the struggle. The revolt against the domination of these forces came in the shape of the Islamic reassertion. Safi presents two manifestations of this phenomenon, the radical stance of Sayyid Quṭb in Egypt and the rationalistic position of Malek Bennabi in Algeria. While Quṭb's ideas gained wider influence, Bennabi's were rather limited in their impact. But the general climate of Islamic reassertion forced even the nationalistic intellectuals to face the necessity of confronting tradition and reinterpreting it, rather than ignoring it completely as they tended to in the past.

Safi discusses two examples of attempts to perform this task, that of the Marxist Ṭayib Tazīnī and the liberal Ḥassan Ḥanafī. In his opinion, the "search for authenticity" by liberal and leftist trends is an important development, which heralds a dialogue between these trends and the Islamic camp, thus creating the right frame for social cooperation and a possible advancement of the process of rationalizations.

This conclusion brings Safi back to his basic thesis: Modernization is essentially a process of rationalization and its failure in the Arab world is a failure to grasp its essence. The modernizing elite thought it could achieve modernization by implanting imported institutions and ideas that were not "an integral part of a meaningful world." They failed because they did not appreciate the need for coming to terms with their past and cultural heritage and did not understand that social change must start in the realm of culture and ideas, i.e., as a result of a meaningful dialogue and persuasion. Modernization could not be imposed. He concludes:

No social group can ever modernize by renouncing its past. Modernization must be attempted from within the realm of tradition and heritage . . . modernization (innovation) and authenticity (originality) are not only compatible with each other, but they are two integral parts of the process of modernization qua rationalization.

The author's general conclusions are difficult to reject, even if he does not depart from the right premises. His treatment of such a profound and daunting topic is rather sketchy and provisional. The identification of modernization and rationalization is rather simplistic, considering the criticisms of capitalism by Marx and others as the ultimate in irrationality, to say nothing of the fact that rationality as a concept is a hotly contested one. Even his discussion itself accepts that modernization actually leads to "the eclipse of substantive rationality" through the fragmentation of consciousness.

Safi also fails to pursue some intriguing consequences of his own assertions. If modernization, as he affirms, has ended in a fragmented and very partial rationality, then the "problem" he set out to explore does not exist in the first place. As far as the Arab world was concerned, the crisis was how to reconcile the Arab heritage with a cohesive worldview presented by the West as an integral aspect of technological modernization.

But if no such coherent and overarching view exists in the later stages of modernization, then everything and every point of view is reconcilable with modernization, including the totality of Muslim heritage, and every possible interpretation of it. So where is the problem then?

This is actually not a merely theoretical conclusion. The rapid modernization processes brought under the acceleration of the oil shock has caused many Muslim countries to bypass completely the cultural component of modernization, reaping its technological and material benefits without having to offer any concessions to cultural modernity.

Safi's book is an interesting contribution to the debate on modernization in the Arab world and the Muslim world at large. It is hoped that his book will stimulate further debate and raise it to a higher, more informed, and sophisticated level.

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Book Review

## Muslims' Responsibilities in Modern Societies

Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Muslims' Responsibilities in Modern Societies*, London: Routledge, 1990, 200 pp.

Abdelwahab El-Affendi's book, *Muslims' Responsibilities in Modern Societies*, is a well-written and thought-provoking work that explores the challenges and responsibilities of Muslims in the modern world. The author, a prominent sociologist and anthropologist, examines the intersection of Islamic values and modern societal norms, offering a nuanced perspective on the role of Muslims in contemporary societies. The book is divided into several chapters, each addressing a different aspect of the topic, from the individual's responsibilities to the broader societal and global context. El-Affendi's analysis is grounded in a deep understanding of Islamic teachings and a keen awareness of the complexities of modernity. The book is a valuable contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the role of religion in the modern world.

El-Affendi's work is particularly relevant in today's world, where Muslims are increasingly living in diverse and pluralistic societies. He argues that Muslims must engage with modernity on their own terms, drawing on Islamic principles to inform their actions and decisions. The book provides a clear and accessible framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities that Muslims face in the modern world. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of religion and modernity.

The book is published by Routledge, a leading publisher of academic and professional books. It is available in paperback and hardcover formats. The paperback edition is priced at \$24.95, and the hardcover edition is priced at \$49.95. The book is available at <http://www.routledge.com>.