

**FRUITLESS ENDEAVOURS:  
MUSLIM THOUGHT AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES**

If the objective of Islamic thought is to provide a pragmatic response to the existential challenge, if its aim is to envision a future historical order that Muslims can identify as their own, if its calling is to help Muslim community make a meaningful contribution to the well-being of humanity, then, the Islamic thought of our century has not progressed much. It has produced little in the way of viable ideas and achieved few of the practical tasks it set upon itself to accomplish. Indeed, for all its energy and commitment, its rage and urgency, it has come to signify a singularly fruitless and sterile enterprise. To the most pressing issues of our day, political legitimacy, economic development, scientific and technical progress, it has retorted not with societal concern but with visionary disdain. Thus, after a century of intense reflection and debate, we are still at the beginning of our quest, having no inkling as to how an immanent Islamic order is to be conceived, let alone established. Even in terms of the seminal moral issues of our age, such as Human Rights and patriarchal repression, our response has not advanced beyond disingenuous apologetics. Fidelity to Islamic conscience demands therefore that the spurious thought of our century be properly scrutinized, nay impeached and censured. Despite their differences of intent, approach and concern, the works reported here insinuate that such an Islamic indictment is not only perfectly in order, it is also urgently called for.

<b>Works Discussed in this Essay:</b>

**TRENDS AND ISSUES IN  
CONTEMPORARY ARAB THOUGHT.**

By Issa J. Boullata. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1990. Pp 219. \$21.95. ISBN 0-7914-0195-2.

**CULTURAL TRANSITIONS IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST.** Ed by Serif Mardin. E.J.

Brill, Leiden, New York, Köln, 1994. Pp 278. ISBN 90-04-09873-9.

**POLITICS AND REVELATION:**

**Mawardi & After.** By Hanna Mikhail. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1995. Pp 95. 29.95. ISBN 0-7486-0519-3.

The problem of *Turath*, Boullata's singularly lucid survey shows, has become the most emotive and divisive issue of modern Arab discourse. Indeed, so strong is its hold on contemporary thought that it has transformed itself into an Arab obsession that borders on the narcissistic. It not only epitomizes secular intellectuals' indulgence in reckless theorizing but also provides them with a convenient cover for debunking the Islamic tradition. Little wonder that the debate on 'tradition and authenticity' tends to be poised between spurious dualities like, modernity vs tradition, rationality vs faith, technology vs culture, and indeed, even Islam vs secularity. Boullata starts his summation of the *Turath* debate with the soul-searching that was 'officially' carried out under the auspices of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO). The proceedings of the "Conference on Authenticity and Renewal in Contemporary Arab Culture" (Cairo, 1971) and that of "The Crisis of Civilizational Development in the Arab Homeland" (Kuwait, 1974), where some of the most redoubtable Arab intellectuals spoke with extreme candour and poignancy,

provides him with a convenient canvass for presenting a panoramic view of the Arab intellectual landscape.

Given the extremely gloomy, almost masochistic, mood of the post-*Nakba* days, it is not surprising that Arab intellectuals tried to rationalize the 'Calamity' (the normal Arab way of alluding to the disastrous 1967 war with Israel) through 'cosmological' arguments. For instance, Zaki Najib Mahmud, the G.O.M. of Egyptian philosophy and an indefatigable champion of 'rationality', arrived at this 'insight' with regard to the Arab failure: 'The essence of Arab culture, old and modern alike', Mahmud asserted, 'is that it distinguishes decisively between God and His creatures, between the absolute idea and the universe of change and transience, between eternal truth and events of history, between the immutability of the Everlasting Being and the dynamism of the everchanging being. The former is substance that does not change, the latter is accident that appears and vanishes. The distinction, however, does not place the two modes of existence at one level: it rather makes the world of events a symbol pointing to the world of eternity...' (p 3). The Arab's allegiance to his heritage, to his authenticity, he propounded further, compels him to 'forego many aspects of modernity'. More concretely, Mahmud concluded, the Heritage rejects the modern concept of man as part of nature and subject to its laws as uncovered by science. Despite its philosophical diction and ethereal expression, the message conveyed by Mahmud was thus brutally candid: Disaster courts those nations that refuse to partake of the sacrament of modernity and science.

At the Kuwait Symposium, Zaki Najib Mahmud, re-affirmed his commitment to 'rationality' with even greater passion. He claimed that 'resort to reason was the one single criterion common to all civilizations, be it that of Pericles's Athens, al-Mam'mun's Baghdad, the Medici's Florence, or Voltaire's Paris.' (p 17) He lamented that contemporary Arabs only paid lip service to rationality, that they avidly chased modern technological gadgets but were intellectually impervious to the demands of the modern age that is based on science, technology

and 'utilitarian ethics'. Accordingly, Mahmud's presents the devotees of *Turath* with the ultimate choice, 'the Arabs had either to live the life of the modern age with all its ethical and rational requirements or else "wring its neck" so that it might see the world through Arab eyes. (ibid.) Dilly-dallying with modernity, in other words, will not do and that Arabs could not continue living in two contradictory cultures as if modernity was not a jealous mistress.

Boullata's provides a generally fair and ideologically neutral account of the Arab debate and does not indulge in any unnecessary polemics with the interlocutors. He merely notes the presence of opposing voices, be these committed to the doctrinaire form of Marxism (Tayyib Tizini, Husayn Muruwwa etc), to the defence of traditional culture (Suhayl Idris, `Abd Allah `Abd al-Da'im etc), or merely espouse the cause of secularism (Muhammad al-Nuwayhi). Though most of the contributors to the Conferences, who've later risen to even greater intellectual prominence such as `Abd Allah al-`Arwi, Qustantin Zurayq, Anwar `Abd al-Malik etc, are merely accorded a brief introduction, the survey does include extended critique of the more radical and perceptive thinkers of those times. To this latter category belong Adonis, Hasan Hanafi and Muhammad `Abid al-Jabiri. All of these, in Boullata's opinion, are anguished writers concerned for the Arab future: 'they study the past in order to rehabilitate the present and suggest ways of achieving better tomorrow.'

The Syrian-Lebanese poet 'of extreme versatility and fecund creativity' `Ali Ahmad Sa`id, who is better known as Adonis, had compiled in the 1960's a voluminous anthology of the Arab poetic heritage. From his observation that Arab poetic taste was governed by a strict conformist aesthetic, Adonis was led to undertake a systematic investigation of Arab culture as a whole, hoping to uncover its ethos which still exercises power and fascination over the Arabs. His findings, which have been presented in a three-volume work entitled (in translation), 'Continuity and Change: A Study of Conformity and Creativity

among the Arabs', offer an interpretation which is 'one of the sharpest and most daring indictments of Arab culture in modern times.' Adonis argues that the dominant mentality (*dhiniyya*) of the Arabs has four characteristics: On the ontological level, it is marked by a distinct theologism (*lahutaniyya*) which separates God from man and considers the religious conception of God as the origin, the axis, and the end of everything. Second, on the psychological-existential level, the Arab mind is oriented towards a preteritism (*madawiyya*) which makes the Arabs cling to what is already known and reject, even fear, what is unknown. Third, on the level of expression and language, the Arab mind revels in separating idea from speech; and fourth, on the level of civilizational development is 'the Arab contradiction with modernity' because he rejects doubt, uncertainty and 'absolute freedom of search.'

The Arab-Islamic groups that have escaped this conformity are, according to Adonis, the ones that have created new concepts regarding the relation of God and man, and that of man and man. For instance, the Sufi experience was a negation of 'the abstract idea of divine transcendence' espoused by the orthodox theology. 'The rationalist tendencies of the Mu`tazila and Muslim scientists, the socialist tendencies of the Qaramita, the aesthetic tendencies negating the need for prophets and religion, and those that opposed chauvinistic Arabism and wanted to replace it by brotherly Islamism, as well as those that introduced ideas of a new hermeneutic giving priority to reason over tradition, and those that supported *haqiqa* (truth) over *shari`a* (law)', all these have been, according to Adonis, historical forces of change and creativity in the Arab heritage. What the poet seems to suggest is, of course, that Arab culture has a religious ethos that is both inhibiting and conformist. Further, the Arab culture cannot transcend itself unless it gets rid of the religious infra-structure and transforms religion into a purely personal experience. Indeed, Adonis is not content with the elimination of religion from the state and public sphere but wishes that the private religion, the religion of the individual,

too must vanish! The ultimate goal of Arab modernity, then, is absolute secularism and atheism.

Muhammad `Abid al-Jabiri's approach, by contrast, is epistemological and involves, as he himself may express it, going beyond ideology to epistemology. Islamic philosophy, al-Jabiri opines, utilizes Greek epistemology and logic not for the sake of uncovering the 'truth' but in the defence of its own ideological claims. Or, expressed differently, it has pragmatic aims not theoretical. Nurtured in this tradition, thus, the modern Arab mind is prone to give 'referential authority to a past model': it falls back on experience and shuns from dealing with what is intellectually possible as if it were a real fact. Resort to a past model, and affirmation of experience, makes memory, and hence, according to al-Jabiri, the emotional and the irrational take the place of reason:

- 'Modern and contemporary Arab discourse is in truth a discourse of memory, not a discourse of reason; it is a discourse which does not speak in the name of a conscious self that possesses independence and employs complete personality, but rather one which speaks in the name of a referential authority that employs memory and not reason. This is very serious, because intellectual concepts in this condition are not related to the reality of which the discourse speaks but rather to another reality which established the past model in the consciousness as the directing, referential authority.' (p 47)

The intellectual concepts of contemporary Arab discourse, al-Jabiri claims, do not reflect the actual Arab reality and are either borrowed from medieval Islamic thought in which they had a specific real (or imagined) content, or else they are borrowed from European thought in which they designate a foreign reality. In sum, there is a break between Arabic thought and its object.

Jabiri recognizes that every thought has an epistemological (objective) and an ideological (subjective) side, the former expresses the theoretical truth and the latter serves its pragmatic interests. In contemporary Arab discourse, however, the two sides do not coincide because the epistemological does not express Arab reality: its referential framework is either medieval Islamic or modern European reality. It is because of this 'epistemological deficiency' that contemporary Arab discourse assumes a 'dogmatic character' which is not amenable in argument 'to logical reference to reality but to further ideological tenacity and make-believe.' Thus, thought becomes a prisoner of the discourse and not its master: it considers what is real and what is possible as equal and it treats what is intellectually possible as if it were a given fact. The four basic traits of contemporary Arab discourse, accordingly, are: 1) 'the domination of the past model, (2) the entrenchment of the jurisprudential analogy, (3) the treatment of what is intellectually possible as given facts and (4) the use of the ideological to cover up the deficiency of the epistemological in the decipherment of reality.

The Arabs need thus to liberate themselves from the referential authority of both the past Arab-Islamic model and the present Western one. Of course, al-Jabiri insists, this does not mean that the heritage should be disposed of, but merely that it should be fully possessed, critically examined and then transcended. Only this would break the spell of the past as it were and restore to the Arab mind its historicity and the relativity of its concepts. Similarly, the Arabs can enter into a critical dialogue with the West only by understanding its historicity and the relativity of its concepts. And yet, paradoxically, one key modern concept, 'rationality', escapes the axe of historicity and relativity with which al-Jabiri cuts medieval Islamic concepts to size, for he pleads for the total adoption of Western science and rationality! Nonetheless, the theme of self-criticism is paramount in al-Jabiri's oeuvre and his two most famous works, *Naqd al-`Aql al-`Arabi* (Critique of Arab Reason) and *Takwin al-`Aql al-`Arabi* (Formation of Arab

Reason) provide keen insights into the epistemological structures of the learned Arab culture.

Arab epistemological systems, according to al-Jabiri, comprise of the following categories:

1. Disciplines of analogical reasoning (*`ulum al-bayan*) are explicatory and exegetical in nature and include the earliest Islamic disciplines such as grammar, rhetoric, prosody, philology, lexicography, and all the sciences of *tafsir*, *hadith*, *fiqh* and *kalam*.
2. Disciplines of intuitive reasoning (*`ulum al-`irfan*) are mystical and authoritative in their method and include esoteric sciences of Sufism, Shi`ism, Isma`ilism, along with theosophy, astrology, numerology (*jafr*) and magic (*sahr*).
3. Disciplines of demonstrative reasoning (*`ulum al-burhan*) are based on empirical observation and logical inference and include logic, mathematic, physics ( i.e. all branches of natural sciences) and even metaphysics.

From this, al-Jabiri argues that the subject of Arab-Islamic discourse was the *text* which unlike *nature*, the subject of ancient Greek thought and that of modern science, was not inexhaustible. It had its limitation which 'exhausted all possibilities of intellectual progress after a certain time...., leaving only a closed circle of repetitious motions governed by rules limiting the intellect itself.' (p 53). Obviously, though he shows enough familiarity with the poststructuralism of Foucault, al-Jabiri had not assimilated the deconstructionist thought of Derrida and others. For he is blissfully unmindful of the claim that a text is as inexhaustible as nature, or conversely, that nature is as finite as a text. Little wonder that the metaphor of nature as text has a long cultural history and in postmodernism even history is treated like a text. The celebrated antinomies



between *noumena* and *phenomena*, norm and experience, text and nature, have all collapsed. The closure of a text, furthermore, is also an impossibility, for the text creates its own context and every effort at decoding it leads to further encoding! The text, in short, is inexhaustible and limitless. The reasons for the Arab's intellectual stagnation, or his debilitating literalism and fundamentalism, in other words, must be sought elsewhere. The possession of a sacred text is not the cause of the Arab's crisis.

From this brief account it would appear that the debate on *Turath*, for all its intellectual and philosophical acuteness, is a non-debate, inconclusive and fruitless and riddled with monstrous abstractions. Its ahistorical, transcendental, truly Kantian if you prefer, idealism has no stomach for facing a full-blooded historical world and its discontents. Needless to say, contemporary Arab thought also possesses its antithesis, its Hegelian and historicist counterpoise as it were, that shifts its gaze from heavenly mansions to earthly dwellings. And yet, such is the sway of the ideal and the abstract on Arab intellectuals that even the historicising Marxian models that they espouse turn out in the end to be simple idealistic schemes and empty abstractions. Most academics and bureaucrats that are skillfully introduced by Boullata, such as Samir Amin, Hisham Sharabi, Anouar Abdel Malek, Jalal Amin etc, may be justifiably accused of committing the sin of idolizing the historical and thus of confounding it with the ideal. Besides these antipodal, idealist and historicist, dimensions of Arab thought, Boullata's survey includes two additional topoi on 'the Modern Relevance of Islam and the Qur'an' and 'Voices of Arab Women' (Aisha `Abd al-Rahman, Zaynab al-Ghazali, Fatima al-Marnisi etc) that impart on his effort its ideological balance and ideational comprehensiveness.

The Islamic dimensions of contemporary Arab thought, whose pivotal figure in Boullata's account is Sayyid Qutb and whose other representatives include Muhammd al-Nuwayhi, Hasan Sa`b, Muhammad `Amara, and Mohammed Arkoun, is

undoubtedly more familiar to the readers of this journal and need not be dwelled upon here. Suffice it to say that though the inclusion of Mohammed Arkoun among the 'ideologues' of Islam may cause some misgivings (Cf. *MWBR*, vol 16, no 1, pp 17-19), Boullata's rationale for doing so is, in my opinion, perfectly sound and fully justified. For all its discomforts, the matrix, moorings and goals of Arkoun's thought are so unmistakably 'Islamic' that to bracket with any other group of Arab thinkers would have been a grave injustice. It is therefore gratifying that Arkoun's thought has been accorded a nuanced, and generally sympathetic, review in this survey. Arkoun's emphasis on method and his search for it within the deconstructionist philosophy of Derrida, however, has yet to bear fruit. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Arkoun's postmodern textual theory advances our understanding of the interaction of the text and the reader far beyond the modernist polemics of al-Jabiri and that his anti-logocentric stance embraces a moral commitment to averting the occlusion of the Truth.

Boullata must be thanked for producing such a rich, lucid and eminently balanced intellectual history. It is an admirable effort that brings our knowledge of Arab thought up-to-date and makes a worthy successor to earlier surveys by Gibb, Smith, Hourani, Laroui, Binder and other perceptive and sympathetic scholars. As noted earlier, this study purports to present, not to critique, various strands of contemporary Arab thought. However, given the exemplary lucidity of the presentation, it may actually assist the Muslim critic in his task of formulating a cogent criticism of non-Islamic ideologies. On that account alone, Boullata's work deserves to be read and appreciated. Every student of contemporary Arab and Islamic thought should benefit from it. And, as for those who do not, or cannot, follow the Arab debate in the original sources, this study is indispensable.

*Cultural Transitions in the Middle East*, is also, for all the blandness of its modest title, as perceptive and rewarding a work of intellectual history as the preceding one by Boullata. Of

course, being a collective enterprise, it lacks the unity and integrity of the former, but what it lacks, it more than makes that up by including studies that take not a descriptive but a critical view of the cultural debate of the Middle East. Islam today, the editor Sherif Mardin reminds the reader, seems to be engaged in the daunting task of reading, listening and looking at the products of Western culture, partly consciously or unconsciously or inadvertently taking over some of the West's models and templates and partly rejecting them and redrawing them within a Muslim cultural frame.' The integration of egalitarian economic philosophies of the West into the Shi'ite discourse, the condemnation of Western materialism by Said Nursi who simultaneously exhorts his followers to acquire knowledge of the physical sciences, the reinterpretation of man as the vicegerent of God in conformity with the anthropocentric vision of Enlightenment etc are all, according to Mardin, signs of cultural transitions and ideological syncretism that is the normal state of affairs in the Islamic world. The contention is that for a proper appreciation of Islam's role in the contemporary world, an understanding of this "mix" is more fruitful than a comprehension of the 'ideal' Islam, the goal of Muslim reformers.

The puzzling thing about these cross-cultural discourses is not merely that the final outcome cannot be predicted, but also that the intellectual processes which shape 'this copying, modifying, and transforming' are little known to scholars. The suggestion here is that despite the apparent conflict of form, and even of substance, Islamic consciousness is subtly but unmistakably being transformed by the ethos of modernity. The popularity of a Turkish novel that conceives Islam primarily as a civil religion, a this-worldly ideology of *social utility*; the new literature which exhibits the thin wedge of individualism slowly creeping in the Muslim psyche; or, conversely, the appropriation of Western arguments by Islamic intellectuals, or the acceptance of the idea of constitutional law, are all adduced to be the tell-signs of the advancement of modernity. Indeed, in a traditional world pierced by the metaphysical arrows of modernity,

authenticity may be a fake tourist-attraction. Or, as a scholar put it: 'Instead of interrogating popular culture for signs of the authentic, it is better that we see authenticity as a modern innovation.' The modern popular culture of the Middle East, however, warns the perceptive editor, may have its own dynamics. Indeed, the failure of some of the secular Western forms to take root in the Middle East can be attributed 'to a total neglect by Middle Eastern Westernizing and secularizing elites of the poetics of space and time as a mode of understanding their own culture and civilization.' Apparently, it is by initiating a study of 'the poetics of space and time' as a mode of self-understanding that the contributors of this book intend to facilitate the reception of the secularizing ideas of the West in their homelands.

Said Amir Arjomand's sterling essay on 'Constitution and Struggle for Political Order' exposes the theoretical and ideological inconsistencies of the constitutional project of the revolutionary and Shi`ite Iran. The very enterprise of constitution-making, Arjomand notes recalling a critical statement of Hannah Arendt, is in some tension with constitutionalism. The tension arises from substituting a written law for an unwritten source, be it the putative natural law of humanity or the sacred law of God, which forms the transcendental foundation of political order. Thus, while the Iranian Fundamental Law of 1906 did not seek any transcendent basis for political authority, the 1979 Constitution of the revolutionary Iran went to a considerable length 'to establish a transcendent foundation for the new political order in Islam.' Thus, after the success of the 1979 revolution, an attempt was made to create an Islamic constitution on the basis of Khomeiny's theocratic doctrine of Mandate of the Jurist (*Wilayat-i Faqih*). The result, contends Arjomand, was 'a radical modification of the traditional Shi`ite theory of authority and its imposition upon the principles and organization of the modern nation-state.'

The principle source of tension in the Iranian Constitution is that the notions of theocracy (Divine sanction) and democracy (popular consent) are based on contradictory principles of authority. Hence, the Fundamental Law of 1979 did not succeed in making the constitutional law of the Islamic republic of Iran consistent with the Shi`ite law. While it declares that "absolute sovereignty belongs to God, and it is He who has made man the governor of his social destiny", the Majles as the organ of national sovereignty is nonetheless retained. Further, Arjomand informs, it is protected by a constitutional gap: no one has the power to dissolve it. Its legislative power, however, is limited not only by the restrictive principle of fidelity of Shi`ite Islam, but also by the clerical Council of Guardians which has veto power over all Majles legislation. Given the extraordinary power of the Council, and its repetitious exercise of veto over parliamentary legislation, it is not surprising that the Islamic Republic experienced a continuous constitutional crisis. Only Khomeiny's extraordinary statement in January 1988, in which he asserted that Government as the absolute mandate (*Wilayat-i Mutlaq*) was 'the most important of the divine commandments and has priority over all derivative divine commandments..'

Clearly, Arjomand argues, 'in strict logic, the God-given Mandate of the Jurist did not need such man-made props as the Fundamental Law. Had there not been a constitutional crisis, this explicit degradation of the Fundamental Law would have been avoided. Nevertheless it only gave expression to the unresolvable contradiction between man-made constitutions and divine law as rival transcendental bases of political order which had been reconciled in the syncretism of a latterday theocratic constitution.' (p 39) The constitutional amendments of 1989, which aimed at removing these legal hurdles and concentrating all power in the hands of the clergy, however, only succeeded in separating the legislative and executive powers. The solid institutionalization of the Majles prevented any monopolization of authority by the executive. Paradoxically, then, the institutionalization of *Wilayat-i Faqih* contributed to the end of

the pluralism and autonomy of the traditional religious leadership of the Sources of Imitation (Maraja`-i Taqlid).

With this radical transformation and politicization of traditional Shi`ite norms of authority, the present constitution of Iran, contends Arjomand, reconciles theocracy and the nation-state in the following manner:

- '(i) the centralization of authority in the executive and judiciary branches of government, invested in the Leader on behalf of the Hidden Imam; (ii) the legal institution of a fundamental distinction between a hierocratic elite, defined by their formal qualification as jurists (*mujtahid*) with eligibility for Leadership, Headship of the Judiciary Power, membership in the Assembly of Experts, and the six consequential positions in the Council of Guardians, and many other offices being reserved for the former (i.e. the clergy); and (iii) the subordination of parliamentary legislation to clerical supervision.' (pp 40-1)

The net result of this constitutional reform is, in the opinion of Arjomand, that the authority of the state, along with its once so despised idolatrous (*taghuti*) bureaucrats has been strengthened. Shi`ism as a religious and clerical network, being subordinate to the state, has been weakened. Indeed, 'even the astute Khomeiny', Arjomand states with a touch of irony, 'was defeated by the cunning of history.'

Space does not permit us to do full justice to the richness and depth of the scholarly vision that is displayed throughout this suggestive work. Some of the topics covered break fresh ground and introduce the uninitiated reader to aspects of the current Islamic debate that are truly novel, nay radical. Such, for instance, is the case with Mehrzad Boroujerdi's examination of 'The Encounter of Post-Revolutionary Thought in Iran with

Hegel, Heidegger, and Popper', in which he recounts the almost violent clash of ideas between 'the two lay religious intellectuals gradually to emerge as the unofficial leading ideologues of the new regime', namely, Reza Davari Ardakani and Abdolkarim Soroush. Equally seminal is Richard K. Khuri's: 'Critique of Hassan Hanafi concerning his reflections on the scarcity of freedom in the Arab-Muslim world'. It is an essay which is philosophically sound, theologically sensitive and intellectually demanding. It looks at the modern, Promethean, obsession with 'freedom' through the metaphysics of language and concludes askance: 'Whether greater freedom in expression will lead to greater freedom of expression is another matter.'

The Turkish Islamic scene also get a good deal of attention in this study. Michael Meeker introduces the reader to 'The Muslim Intellectual and His Audience: A New Configuration of Writer and Reader among Believers in the Republic of Turkey.' Meeker reveals the dialectics of secularism and Islam in modern Turkey through the study of a new breed, the lay Islamic intellectual, who is uncompromising in his cultural critique (and who for this reason is often branded as 'modernist', 'radical', 'leftist', 'Khomeinist', or even 'Shi'ite' by his more conservative co-religionists!) but who takes on the secular West. Sabri Sayari relates how the analysis of 'International Relations' provides fertile grounds of Islamic criticism, but it is a criticism which is often more Turkish and nationalist than universal and Islamic. Sherif Mardin treats the broad theme of cultural change and the effects of secularization in modern Turkey and the role of the intellectual. Shahrough Akhavi deepens our understanding of Sayyid Qutb's polemics against philosophy and his vindication of the Islamic tradition. All in all, it is an exciting work that is fresh in its outlook, yet deep in its analysis and should prove challenging to anyone who is interested in the History of Ideas, a much neglected and under-developed sub-discipline with regard to the contemporary Muslim world.

Hanna Mikhail's *Politics and Revelation* does not survey the current debate at all, but deals with one of the classical figures

of Sunni political theory, Al-Mawardi. It is a purely academic study, a doctoral thesis that has come out in print more than two decades after its presentation at Harvard and almost two decades after the death of its author. And yet, its publication marks a self-conscious, almost clamorous entry into the cultural and political debate of our times. Never was the adage that 'every work of history is a statement about current politics' more true than in this case: its classical canvass reveals a contemporary image and its academic cast carries a political message. The author of this treatise, Hanna Mikhail, a Palestinian freedom fighter known within the revolutionary circles as Abu Omar, was a graduate of Harvard, who taught at various American universities before joining the PLO. He died in 1976 'giving his life to the Palestinian cause.' Edward Said, another committed Palestinian and a daring and liberating intellect, says in the introduction to his friend Abu Omar's posthumous work: 'When I think of the present state of affairs, with so much that has been discarded and voluntarily abandoned in our history, when the doctrines of realism and pragmatism are trumpeted by smug and shameless winners, and when a shabby, undemocratic Palestinian protectorate under Israeli rule is proclaimed as the fulfillment of our aspirations, I am also led inevitably to think of Hanna Mikhail, and in particular his dedication and principled course of action on behalf of his people.' Such was the man who authored this study, and such is the motivation for publishing it today.

As for the work itself, it delivers, by all standards, an extremely succinct statement. The main body of the text occupies only 64 pages, to which another 24 are added in the form of bibliography, notes and appendixes, thus totalling in all a meagre 92 page - surely, something of a record for a doctoral thesis. Nevertheless, it has always been recognized that bulk is never a measure of the profundity of a work, academic or otherwise. And so is it with Abu Omar's dissertation: it is incisive, perceptive and suggestive as few other scholarly studies dealing with the same subject. In fact, the only previous



efforts it bears comparison with, in terms of imaginative daring, keenness of vision and intellectual perspicacity, are the few, equally terse, statements by H.A.R. Gibb! To recognize this is, of course, to accord Hanna Mikhail's work the highest of accolades. His is a synoptic statement that elucidates the intimate affiliation that exists between politics and revelation not only in Al-Mawardi's thought, but also within Sunni political culture as a whole. However, what it exposes is much less of a sacerdotal theory of divine sanction impossible to implement in a power-worshipping, sinful world, but the pragmatic foundations of a politically sagacious vision that is capable of transforming any kind of power into legitimate authority. By the imposition of a minimum of restraints, by being exercised within the outermost parameters of the Shar`ia and for the maintenance of justice, political power is channeled in the service of the faith community of Islam. The merits and demerits of Mikhail's thesis are sure to generate a debate among scholars.

Far more interesting, for the readers of this journal at least, is the concluding statement about 'Islamic and Western Political Thought' that inter alia impinges on the contemporary debate on modernity and political order. Mikhail is justified in claiming that medieval Islam and medieval Christendom exhibit striking similarities in their political theories, indeed even in their political practice. They both viewed themselves as universal communities in which men of religion rather than rulers claimed guardianship of faith and they both accepted that religion provided a pervasive ethical ideal and served as a legitimizer of rulers. They both were also 'pessimistic' and anti-political in their worldview to the extent that they believed that perfect justice and bliss could not be attained in a politically constituted reality but only in the Hereafter. Politics, as Mikhail observes, did not, as with the Greeks, 'aspire to attaining the supreme good but had to be satisfied with realizing the lesser evil.' Further, both Islam and Christianity sacralized the community and placed it above the individual. Similarly, there was equal emphasis on harmony within an essentially hierarchical

conception of society. The capital difference between the two was, of course, the existence of a comprehensive divine law in the case of Islam and that of the church (a divinely sanctioned institution that not only stood apart from but also above every earthly kingdom, every temporal state) in the case of Christianity.

Despite the proclamation of a single unified vision of the ideal Islamic society, a vision which perceived no cleavage of church and state within the body-Islamic, faith and power were never totally united in the Dar al-Islam. Mikhail recognizes that this deviance from the ideal was actually as a compromise as it 'gave the rulers great leeway in governing their dominion, and largely excluded the function of government from the formulated divine law.' (p 55. Emphasis added) The rules and ordinances of the rulers and their officials, which actually determined the functioning of the government, were, however, never 'canonized': they never became part of the Shari`a legislation. According to Mikhail, 'the fact that ..... Muslim ideologues were hesitant to admit the existence and legitimacy of administrative regulations, let alone Roman and natural law, meant that non-Shar`i "laws" were neither elaborated nor brought into harmony with the religious ideal.' (ibid.) However, this fact signifies to Mikhail that the world of Islam missed the opportunity to come up with its own version of the so-called 'Thomist synthesis' of reason and revelation. Paradoxically, however, the unitary Thomist vision was instrumental in recognizing the legitimacy of the natural-human law and differentiating it from the divine law. One salutary outcome of this development was, of course, that in the West ethical injunctions came to be distinguished from the positive, enforceable laws and Aquinas could define human law 'as an act of will promulgated by him who has coercive power.' Governance as the realm par excellence of coercive power became then a purely human affair, to be regulated by consent and rationality.

Whatever the societal benefits of this dichotomization of the human and the divine, the ethical and the legal, the coercive and the persuasive, it must be recognized that the Thomist scheme provides a Christian legitimation of the secularist project for the fulfillment of which man ultimately 'kills God.' Little wonder that medieval Muslim theorists, who too had proposed similar distinctions between indispensable obligations (*Fard `Ain*) and the dispensable ones (*Fard Kifaya*) that could easily have evolved into the categories of the ethical and the legal, did so without disrupting the overall divinely ordained unity of the Islamic worldview. (Such a bifurcation of the classical fiqh into two subdivisions, one pertaining to the individual and her conscience (*Fard `Ain*) and the other pertaining to the coercive power of the community (*Fard Kifaya*), is still possible, indeed even desirable.) That Muslims like Aquinas did not produce a dualistic vision of the ultimate scheme of things is due to their monotheistic moorings. For, as admitted even by a hostile critic of Islam, 'In order to work for the power and glory of his earthly city, man in Islam does not have to kill God.' Any kind of thought, Muslim or not, that does not recognize this, is spurious from the Islamic point of view.

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