

BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

Euroislam: Can Islamic Monotheism Meld with European Secularism?

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Demographic projections forecast a majority Moslem population in Europe within the next twenty years, due not only to increasing Muslim immigration but also to the current low birthrate of indigenous non-Muslim Europeans and the much higher birthrate of both immigrant and established Muslim communities in Europe. In this article a distinguished German scientist reviews two recent books by Muslim scholars which advocate a melding of a moderated form of Islam with European rationalism and secularism, and asks whether it is possible to combine belief in an all-powerful monotheistic deity with a culture inspired by rational, scientific secularism,

Die Islamische Herausforderung:

Religion und Politik in Europa des 21. Jahrhunderts

(The Islamic Challenge:

Religion and Politics in 21st Century Europe)

Bassam Tibi

Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (in German) 3rd Ed., 2008

The author is an immigrant into Europe who was born in Damascus but studied at German Universities and was granted German citizenship in 1976. Until his retirement he was a professor for International relations at the University of Göttingen in Germany and has held no less than eighteen visiting professorships at leading European and American universities including Harvard, Yale, UC Berkeley, Princeton, Cornell and even the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies in Washington, D.C. Tibi has written extensively about conflict around the world and argues against racism, which he says is a European invention (as

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Also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Mataré (Ed.).

though ancient Egyptians had not practiced it against Negroes, and other societies around the world had not subjugated and despised other peoples long before Europeans built empires and introduced modern technology to the rest of the world). He has authored a number of books with the same general theme: that Europeans should overcome what he calls “Euro-arrogance” and “xenophobia” and should accept immigrants freely into Europe, modifying existing secular European culture in order to create a new continental-wide EuroIslamic culture acceptable to its growing Muslim population.

He argues two main theses in this book. First, he describes what he considers to be the cause of the confrontational relations between Islam and the Western nations, speaking of a hatred of the West originating in the economic and technical inferiority of the Islamic world. Second, he proposes that the Western nations are too secular and need to reintroduce a sense of the “sacral” into their politics and everyday life, and that the Islamization of Europe may do just that.

To Tibi, Europe should accept a more full-blooded cultural pluralism, not just a state of multiculturalism in which secular Western culture remains dominant. Tibi talks about the “basic right” for strong religious rules and an increase in the influence of what he calls the “sacral.” He considers himself to be a Moslem but believes that Islam needs to be reformed, and that Islam should merge with the European secular and scientific culture of Europe to create a new Europe-wide, *Leitkultur*, that will be acceptable to Muslims and would meld Islamic values into the existing European secular culture. This is the only way, he told *Der Spiegel*, that Europe can avoid a Huntington-style “clash of civilizations.”

With today’s massive migration of Muslims into Europe, Tibi observes that the Mediterranean has ceased to be a dividing frontier between the Muslim world and Europe. As an immigrant himself, he strongly opposes arguments for the restriction of immigration into Europe, condemning such suggestions in the usual way by calling them “racist.”

European culture, he says, will ultimately benefit from the growing percentage of Muslims in Europe because they will bring with them the idea of a religious “absolute”; and, to the extent that they themselves abandon jihad and violence, a new culture will emerge which he calls Euroislam.

Whether a secular, scientifically alert culture can come to terms with monotheistic absolutism is indeed questionable, but regardless of this Tibi envisages a somewhat confused synthesis of these contrasting concepts. He coins the expression “the politicization of religion” for the process of melding what he calls the “sacral” into European culture and the European political system. Secularization, in his opinion, means only the separation of belief and politics, and he suggests that as a result of Islamic immigration Europeans will benefit by reacquiring a stronger belief in the existence of God, and encouraging a larger role for religion in the political arena.

Tibi’s critics may argue that, throughout history, commitment to historic monotheistic religions has too frequently brought war rather than peace, but while he acknowledges the lack of peace between the two prime forms of Islamic religiosity (i.e., Shi’ite and Sunni), he implies that it is the activities of the West that have revived these ancient antagonisms. To this reviewer, it would seem that a great number of wars in history have been caused by conflict between rival monotheistic sects and religions, and that it might be more correct to argue that the pressure of overpopulation is a major contributor to the recent revival of such ancient inter-Islamic conflicts. Tibi himself mentions that the women’s head shawl, scarf or *nicab*, and especially the *burqua* (with only eye-slits), are typical products of the Islamic emphasis on sex. Such restraints, he says, are necessary in a culture where the male sex drive is foremost in human interaction and finds satisfaction in polygyny. (It is to be noted that most Arabic Moslem countries have a 4% per annum population growth rate; i.e., their population currently doubles every 20 years.)

Tibi is concerned about jihad violence, which he sees as turning indigenous Europeans against Islam, but advocates

the peaceful construction of mosques in Europe and the USA as an alternative to suicide attacks such as that on the World Trade Center. We know that although immigrant Muslim youths are fleeing the overpopulation of their own countries in search of a better life in Europe (Egypt's population grows by a million every nine months, with resulting massive unemployment), their activities in their new European home country are too frequently a criminal exploitation of the openness of the host country. Tibi blames this on the weakness of religious controls in Europe.

Tibi acknowledges that the oft-suggested Muslim argument that the decline of interest by Moslems in science and philosophy after their expulsion from Spain was somehow due to the Crusaders and the Jews is wrong. But he strongly criticizes European imperialism, blaming this for disrupting the cultures of other nations. While he acknowledges the spread of Islam by conquest and enforced conversion, he forgives this on the ground that it was inspired by religion and not by race. This reviewer would suggest that, in reality, the backwardness of the Moslem masses in matters of modern science and technology is simply due to their resignation to the "will of Allah," their concentration on a day-filling religion, plus a preoccupation with their sex life. Rapid population increase, when combined with backwardness in matters of food production (modern agriculture), energy technology, education and modern civilization, promotes poverty and pressures the rapidly growing Moslem population of the world to migrate not only to secular Europe, but also to Australia and the USA, where the migrants gladly accept governmental hospitality and generous welfare support.

According to Tibi, the French attempts at a policy of *laïcité* (equal treatment of all religions) should be a model for all European countries receiving this vast influx of Moslem migrants. But the French ideal is based on the assumption that all religions are equal, whereas those who object to the Islamization of Europe point out that some religions are more willing to accept scientific progress than others, and that present day Islam retards free thought,

restricts individual freedom, and is a brake on scientific and technological progress.

Aware of this situation, Tibi enters into long discussions about the early Mediterranean civilizations and the Renaissance. He recognizes that the philosophy of reason, based on the worldview of the Renaissance, should be the basis of modern thought. But like the dogmatic early Christian rulers, who eventually closed Plato's Academy several hundred years after his death, most Islamists still reject the primacy of reason in favor of a God-centered world-view of fantasy.

Tibi savors the historical fact that after monotheistic Christianity had suppressed scientific inquiry throughout Europe, Aristotle's ideas for a time survived only amongst Muslim Arab scholars, and that it was from Arabic books that these were eventually reintroduced to Europe. But he notes that subsequent Muslim thinkers advanced more repressive ideas, including both the omnipotence of Allah and jihad, or holy war.

Today's exponents of jihad still reject the modern scientific position that man must define his own fate on this planet, and seek to subject all humanity to the Islamic faith. Tibi admits that the conflict between theocentrism and humanism was solved in Europe, but not in Islam, and that in the course of subsequent history, Moslem clerics suppressed the measure of rationalism that early Arab scholars in Cordoba had espoused. "Without humanism and rationalism the Islamic civilization will not overcome the general crisis and their obvious self-victimization," he says. Tibi recognizes that popular Islamic beliefs are a regression back to pre-Renaissance thought, and is concerned that most Moslem immigrants to Europe ignore earlier Islamic rationalism in favor of their commitment to the omniscience of Allah.

Tibi has been welcomed amongst European and American academics because he regards "Islamic totalitarianism" as a threat to secularism and to friendly relations between indigenous Europeans and Muslims. He claims jihadism is not the religion of Islam, but the product

of a radical Muslim sect dedicated to world revolution. He sees that it is a strong movement, and we note that in opinion polls in Morocco, 74% of the respondents felt positive about suicide bombers, while 45% felt positive about Osama bin Laden.

Tibi is right in saying that multiculturalism has failed in Europe, but while Europe's Muslim population continues to grow, it is difficult to believe that a blending of Islam and European secularism is possible so long as most adherents to Islam continue to believe in the omnipotence of an all-powerful monotheistic god, and European culture remains wedded to the ideals of intellectual freedom and the free pursuit of scientific knowledge about man and the universe.

Der Untergang der islamischen Welt: Eine Prognose
(**"The Downfall of the Islamic World: a Prognosis"**)

Hamed-Abdel Samad

Droemer Verlag (German) 2010

In this historic/socioeconomic survey, the author, who was one of five children born to a Sunni Imam in Gizeh, Egypt, describes how he came to Germany to study political science at the University of Augsburg. There, he digested Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and studied the cultural history of both Europe and Islam, and was amazed when Germans belittled their own culture.

It seems that his life as a child and youth in Egypt had been painful. He was assaulted and raped at the age of five and again suffered multiple rape at the age of eleven. It is perhaps not surprising that his first book, *Mein Abschied vom Himmel (My Farewell from Heaven)* led to a *fatwa* being issued against him in Egypt.

His studies in Europe led him to conclude that Spengler's analysis was applicable also to the present situation of Islam. Today, he argues, the Arab populations have become accustomed to the products of the modern, technical world, based on "science and a secular state of mind," but the miserable state of the Islamic countries with

respect to modern science and technologies is concealed from most Muslims by a culture of resistance and protest. In Samad's opinion, Islam is in a state of withdrawal, in which religious demonstrations are a cover-up for missed development.

Islam, Samad told *Der Spiegel* in an interview published in the September 17, 2010 issue of that journal, "is like a drug, like alcohol. A small amount can have a healing and inspiring effect, but when the believer reaches for the bottle of dogmatic faith in every situation, it gets dangerous. This high-proof form of Islam is what I'm talking about. It harms the individual and damages society. It inhibits integration, because this Islam divides the world into friends and enemies, into the faithful and the infidels."

In this book, Samad asks "what are the contemporary contributions of the Islamic world to Western knowledge, art, architecture, and the sciences?" What he sees is an intransigent orthodoxy that has long passed its zenith. He rejects the common Moslem excuse that European colonialism has prevented the full development of the Islamic world. While Christian invaders are said to have overwhelmed the true worshippers, it is more the Islamic subdivision of the world into "believers" and "non-believers" that has prevented the Arabic peoples from keeping pace with modern science. Samad complains that an examination of the textbooks used in Moslem schools reveals the restricted nature of the culture offered to the next generation.

Samad notes that in its early years Islam did convert an uneducated Arab population into one with a highly developed culture by introducing them to classical Greek science and logic at a time when these were being suppressed in Christian Europe. When Mohammed died, he says, Jihad and Shari'a had not yet gained dominance, but after the Koran came to be accepted as the basis of all wisdom this led to the intellectual isolation of the Arab world. Later Moslem kings and leaders built schools, but in these the Koran was advanced as the basis of all knowledge, and philosophy and the natural sciences were ignored.

The author reports how many Moslems who have migrated to Europe have become more open in their outlook. But he also tells us how many Egyptians who came to Denmark and London, ready to accept secular culture, left Europe with a distaste for what they perceived as the “decadence” of contemporary European culture. He cites as an example a Moslem who took a job as a door-keeper at a London discotheque, only to become a radical opponent of what he came to regard as European “culture”.

Moslems, Samad states, have a chronic psychological readiness to feel insulted. The archaic culture of resistance defeats the needed cooperation with the West. Under the heading, “I am Muslim, ergo I am insulted,” he alleges that Muslims persistently look for ill-treatment of Muslims anywhere in the world, or for pejorative references to Mohammed. Reading what he says, we are reminded of the British teacher in Sudan who was arrested because she had named her teddy bear, “Mohammed.” At the same time, Samad speaks of an unjustified self-glorification of Islam, a cramping resistance to change and progress, and complains that in its road to self-glorification, Islam damages the lives of those who seek to progress. He sees greatest weakness of Islam in its position vis-a-vis individualism, which prevents a smooth adjustment to contact with secular societies.

Samad particularly compares the position of women in Islam with the condition of ill-treated animals. He asserts that 90% of women are mistreated in Moslem countries, quoting a World Economic Forum report which places Pakistan at position 132 in the world in the treatment of women, Egypt at 126, and Turkey at 129. Iran was placed 128, and Yemen 129. Female genital mutilation, he says, is still widely practiced in Islamic countries, as prescribed by the Prophet: thus, in Egypt, 85% of all women are still subjected to this ritual. He asks how a society can develop when one half of its citizens are prevented from leading a normal life.

Samad charges that in all Muslim states there is a tendency for true believers to reject scientific findings that challenge their religion, even such things as space-flight,

astrophysics and modern astronomic studies. The explosion of a spacecraft was even depicted by some as God's revenge. During their Cordoba time, Muslims translated many old works from India, China and Greece, but the philosophers of Cordoba wrote that science could not confirm the words of the Koran. By contrast, Samad alleges, the Muslim world today is flooded by cheap literature that misleads its readers by alleging a "scientific basis" for the Koran." Yet, all Arab states together publish in one year no more books than Spain or Greece translate in one year.

To further advance his argument, Samad compares the reaction of other countries that have been impacted by what he calls the US-dominated new world order. Japan, Korea, Chile, Argentina, and even Cuba, he notes, have adapted to, or are adapting to, the globalization of industry. But radical Muslims are prevented from doing so by their narrow religious concepts. Indeed, he says, the terror attacks by jihadists in New York, Madrid, and London, and the murderous ventures in Istanbul, Karachi, Baghdad and Kabul, show that radical religious ideologues are willing to tear apart not only infidel society but also their own Islamic societies.

While insisting that he remains a Muslim, Samad urges European Muslims to avoid jihad and to drop their demands for shari'a law, and to practice a milder form of religion that he calls "Islam light," so as to be able to meld with indigenous European society. His "Islam light" is Islam without shari'a, jihad, and the suppression of women.

In Summary

These two Moslem scholars, Tibi and Samad, have been acclaimed in the Western world for their suggestion that Moslem immigrants into Europe and indigenous Europeans should work together to meld Islamic and contemporary European culture into a harmonious unity. While the picture that they paint of the Islamic world outside Europe is a dismal one, the fact is that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Europe show few signs of wishing to assimilate, choosing to set up what in effect are Islamic isolates or ghettos. Indeed, Muslims in Britain have a privileged

position, protected in many ways by law. Nevertheless, in 2010 Wikileaks revealed that a survey conducted by the UK Center for Social Cohesion on the opinions of 600 Muslim students at 30 British universities showed that 32 % supported killing in the name of Islam and that 40% wanted Shari'a law in the United Kingdom.

Indeed, to the extent that modern European culture has accepted freedom of thought and speech (I say "to the extent that" because free speech is by no means absolute in Europe), and is guided by rationalism and a spirit of scientific inquiry, it is hard to see how a religion rooted in the belief in an omniscient all-powerful God can find common ground with a European culture that seeks to be guided by rationalism and secularism. What is more likely is that either the Islamic religion will lose its hold on European Muslims and they will lose their belief in the omniscience of Allah (in the way that Christianity is losing its hold other than as a machine for advancing specific ethical values dear to the hearts of those who control it) or that the continued influx of Muslims fresh from Africa and Asia will further reinforce radical Islam in Europe and prevent the melding of cultures as desired by Tibi and Samad. If that happens, and a conservative Muslim majority acquires dominance in Europe, then that continent may well fall into decline as a center of technological and scientific progress.