Book Reviews

Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism

John Calvert

New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. hbk. 388 pages.

Radicalism and Political Reform in the Islamic and Western Worlds

Kai Hafez

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. pbk. 259 pages.

The Future of Islam

John L. Esposito

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010. hbk. 248 pages.

Reform, Radicalism, and the Role of Islam in Modern Societies

These three books cover the common themes of the last century and a half of Muslim activism – reform, radicalism, and the role of Islam in modern societies. Each book covers a different phase in the history of Islamic revivals and their interactions with modernity. John Calvert's book is a study of Sayyid Qutb's work during the phase of the heightened Cold War ideological contestations in the postcolonial period, both in the Muslim lands as well as globally. Kai Hafez's book focuses largely on the last several decades when the study of democracy and democratization came to the forefront of the academic/policy scene in the West – but also among the Muslim activists. Finally, John Esposito's book spotlights the Muslim present and its possible futures. Combined, the books provide an overview of the important issues surrounding Muslim activism and possibilities for political and religious reform among the Muslims.

Sayyid Qutb is often called the ideologue of modern Islamic radicalism – and for a good reason, according to John Calvert. Yet, Qutb was much more than that. He was a complex person, with various aspects to his personality. He was also a product of the time in which he lived, something Calvert goes to explain very carefully at great length. The book chronicles Qutb's life – from a small Egyptian village, to his nationalist and literary critic phases, then to his turn to Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamism, and finally to his radicalization and martyrdom. Calvert weaves the narrative of Qutb's biography by examining both his writings and the context in which these writings were written. One of the fallacies of many works treating Qutb's ideas, published during the highly ideologically charged last decade, was that they examined his ideas as if they were created in a vacuum. Citing a paragraph here and a sentence there, these books often ended up in non sequiturs – providing a linear, non-contextual, progression from Sayyid Qutb to Bin Laden, for example. Calvert does write about this issue, but cautions against such hastened conclusions – while not neglecting the influence of Qutb's ideas on later generations of Muslim radicals. The author suggests that the violence the radicals use against the civilians is something Qutb would never approve of. The book makes a strong case for the assertion that Qutb's radicalization was a product of the existence of Nasser's repressive state building attempts in Egypt, combined with the cruel nature of the police apparatus such a state created. The chapter on Qutb's experiences in the United States will be of particular interests to an American reader. Calvert portrays Qutb as a very sensitive person, whose life experiences and the events surrounding him presented the option of radicalism that he pursued late in his life.

Calverts' Sayyid Qutb is a person who possesses a heightened artistic outlook on life, seeking aesthetics and showing a strong intellectual proclivity beginning in his childhood. Qutb's sensitivity to his environment and all it offers, including the world of the unseen, will cause him to be surprised at the Americans' lack of curiosity in exploring anything beyond their own front yards. According to Calvert's description of Qutb's feelings, this was "symptomatic of the American preoccupation with the external, material, and selfishly individual dimensions of life" (147). In Qutb's words, "I stayed there [in Greely, Colorado] six months and never did I see a person or family actually enjoying themselves, even on summer nights when breezes waft over the city as in a dream" (147). After spending his youth and early career as a nationalist and as a literary critic, Qutb had already shifted his interest toward a more systematic study of Islam before he went to America. Indeed, his *Social Justice in Islam* was written

before he left Egypt and traveled to America on an educational mission. Upon returning to Egypt, after his sojourn in the United States, Qutb was pleased to learn that *Social Justice* received a very warm reception among the Egyptian readership. He already had an idea that the book was becoming important when he received an offer, while in America, from the British Arabist, John Heyworth-Dunn, to translate it into English. Soon after returning from the United States, Sayyid Qutb joined the Muslim Brothers. He would eventually end up in jail, after the fallout between the Brothers and the Nasser regime in the aftermath of the Free Officers Coup. While in jail, Qutb witnessed and heard how Nasser's torturers would inflict enormous pain on the Brothers. His writings took a turn toward radicalism and against the state. He developed the notions of *jahiliyah* (ignorance of divine guidance) and *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty), the first one taken from Mawdudi, as the tools with which he then sought to delegitimize Nasser's regime. The pinnacle of these ideas was *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Milestones), the book that earned him the death sentence. Calvert brilliantly describes the last years of Qutb's life, leading to his death and martyrdom. In Calvert's narrative, the ultimate outcome was inevitable – something that Qutb seemed to have resigned himself to as well. Calvert paints a dignified, emphatic picture of Qutb in his last days and hours, while enveloping the narrative with the atmosphere of drama and uncertainty, and with a hint of things to come.

John Calvert's book on Sayyid Qutb is a rare gem. It combines the erudition of a historian with the dramatization of a screenplay writer. The result is a highly readable book, which is based on the wealth of primary and secondary sources, both in Arabic and English. At times, the reader is drawn into Qutb's life dramas as a witness – standing, as it were, as an observer of a carefully choreographed stage play based on Calvert's unparalleled mastery of source material. Calvert's tone is emphatic, yet creating a necessary distance between himself and the subject. This book will most likely remain the definitive English work on Sayyid Qutb for a long time.

The cover of Kai Hafez's book had a strange familiarity for an informed reader. It took a while for me to realize that the book cover was stunningly similar to Esposito and Voll's *Islam and Democracy*, published about a decade and a half earlier. This similarity is reminiscent of Edward Said's example of reading Gérard de Nerval – who, while writing in different decades and partly about different lands, provided essentially the same, static, unchanging picture of the (Muslim) Orient. While most likely the publisher's decision, the inclusion of such a picture is very telling indeed.

Gratefully, Kai Hafez's book does not fall into the above Orientalist category. The book explores political developments in the Muslim world

during the past several decades – particularly as these are related to democratization, radicalism, and reform. In order to make sense of these developments, Hafez attempts a comparative historical study, outlining similarities and differences between the West's past and present experiences with these concepts and the Muslim world's struggle during the past decades. The book is translated from German, yet it does not read as a translation, which is an excellent achievement. The book's organization, though, is often confusing. In an attempt to include as many relevant topics as possible, Hafez shifts from one issue to another in an abrupt way, leaving the reader with an unenviable task of figuring out the missing links. The book often reads like a collection of vignettes about various topics – which, while united by not always apparent common logic, stand rather well on their own.

These deficiencies notwithstanding, *Radicalism and Political Reform in the Islamic and Western Worlds* has several strong points, which make it a recommended reference. It is divided into three big themes: modernity, democracy, and violence. In each of these subdivisions, the author examines various expressions of Islam in modern and contemporary times – finds linkages and commonalities among these expressions – and places them in a comparative study with Western modernity. Hafez suggests that, just like the Western modernity produced both its contents and critiques, modern Islamic fundamentalism (the term which Hafez prefers over Islamism for reasons he explains on pages 3 and 4) likewise created not only its own image but it also presented a critique of modernity, which in turn resulted in the West's countercritique of fundamentalism. Hafez points out that the evolution of Western modernity from its origins to its contemporary democratic expressions – culminating in the notion of individual and human rights – were neither linear nor nonviolent. This evolution included a number of revolutions, both theological and political, and has given the world not only the contemporary democracy, but it has also spawned colonialism, racism, imperialism, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and fascism (see especially part 3 of the book, "Political Violence"). Likewise, Islamic fundamentalism produced its own versions of these, often violent, phenomena – including, of course, al-Qa'ida and Bin-Ladenism (probably a better term than *jihādism*). At the same time, the fundamentalism has also been the source of empowerment for millions of Muslim men and women who were trying to make some sense of an increasingly compartmentalized and disenchanted world, something Hafez demonstrates in his discussion on re-Islamization and its role as a social movement (50–65). The book also makes a strong argument for the important role the fundamentalists are playing in authoritarian countries of the Muslim world. Hafez's com-

parative discussion of the function that the radical forces fulfill in Muslim countries and the West is among the strongest sections in the book (103–133).

Where and how would democracy fit in a contemporary Muslim experience, if at all? *Radicalism and Political Reform in the Islamic and Western Worlds* provides a possible answer by looking at Muslim democracies – such as Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia, and even Pakistan and Lebanon (but not Malaysia). Another opportunity is with the nonviolent and centrist Islamist political parties – like Morocco's Justice and Development Party, Egypt's Muslim Brothers and al-Wasat Party (and perhaps the new, MB-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party?), Yemen's Islah, Jordan's Islamic Action Front, and other similar parties and groups (80). When looking at the state of democratization in the Muslim world, Hafez uses the Freedom House[1] and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index[2] as the main sources – yet he fails to provide the actual data in the book, leaving us to either take his word when analyzing democratization, or to scramble for the databases to corroborate his findings. Apart from that, there are many other databases and sources that can be used to study democracy and democratization. These include, in no particular order: Polity IV, the U.S. Department of State Human Rights Reports, Inter-Parliamentary Union Reports, IDEA Voter Turnout, and the Economist Intelligence Unit. Hafez does not mention why he chose the Freedom House and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index and why he decided to exclude all the others.

Where Hafez and Calvert would likely agree is in the notion that radical times produce radical figures. What Hafez could adopt from Calvert is an in-depth study of various thinkers before ascribing certain views to them. For instance, Hafez charges Qutb and Mawdudi with "push[ing] for an offensive 'holy war'" (198), but he depends on secondary sources for this claim. His statement might be correct, but the importance of the subject would require a more thorough exploration before coming to such an important claim. This dependence on secondary sources leads Hafez to come to questionable and unwarranted conclusions. For example, he claims that "teachings such as those of [Tariq] Ramadan or [Yusuf] Al-Qaradawi are unlikely to endure over the long-term . . . [because] their ideological production is largely anchored in their personal situations" (34), without providing any supporting evidence. He lists only one book and one article by Ramadan and no books or articles by al-Qaradawi in its bibliography. Furthermore, Hafez makes a dubious statement that al-Qaradawi "owes his rise to public prominence to the Emir of Qatar, who appointed him dean and made him famous all over the world on the *Al-Jazeera* channel" (55),

and he calls al-Qaradawi a "preacher" (81) later in the book. A quick reference to al-Qaradawi's works in Arabic would easily show that, regardless of what one thinks of al-Qaradawi's ideological orientations and personal opinions on various issues, he has been one of the most prolific, popular, and widely acclaimed Muslim scholars of the last several decades, well before *al-Jazeera* was established. This reputation is primarily based on his various scholarly and popular works – including those on the Qurān, Sunnah, *fiqh*, *zakat*, Islamic revival, and the dangers of extremism. In spite of the paucity of evidence for it, Hafez speculates that al-Qaradawi would support "the dictatorship of scholarly opinion alone" (35). Al-Qaradawi's *Min Fiqh al-Dawlah fi al-Islam* could be a good starting point for resolving these speculations. Hafez seem to be not well acquainted with the details and nuances of contemporary Islamic thought, which is evident in the complete absence of works in languages other than English and German. The book's description of the young religious generation in the Muslim world as apolitical and not transformational, what Hafez calls re-Islamization and the neo-religious movement (53), is contradicted by this generation's support for the Palestinian cause, for instance, as well as their role in the recent Arab Spring. Kai Hafez's book is on a much firmer ground when he discusses modernity, politics, and violence. Since the latter constitutes the majority of the book, the overall quality of the book passes the threshold for recommended readings.

John Esposito's *The Future of Islam* is in many ways a culmination of several decades of research on the Muslim world by this prolific scholar. Even a casual reader, not acquainted with John Esposito's long academic career, would quickly surmise that the author has a deep and intimate knowledge of Islam and Muslims. *The Future of Islam* studies almost the same questions and issues as *Radicalism and Political Reform* – reform, revolution, violence, Islam's compatibility with modernity, democracy, and human rights – but does so in a different, and much more satisfying, manner. In the first chapter, Esposito introduces Islam and Muslims to the reader, but does so in unexpected and refreshing ways. Instead of talking about Islam at the outset, Esposito chooses to write about the Muslim first. Likewise, he concentrates on the American and European Muslims, instead of the usual focus on the Middle East. In this chapter, he highlights the Islamophobia that has become pronounced in America during the last decade, but he also showcases the American and European Muslims, who stood up against both the Islamophobia and the Muslim radicals. By claiming their rightful place in Western societies, these Muslim scholars, leaders, and ac-

tivists are creating the reality of Islam in the West. Finally, the first chapter addresses some of the common questions asked in the United States and Europe: Why Muslims do not condemn terrorism? What is Sharī'ah? What is *jihād*? And how can you tell a Sunni from a Shi'i?

The book's second chapter broadly covers the role of religion in politics, focusing on the Muslim world. Esposito briefly discusses the emergence of democratically oriented Muslim political parties and movements – such as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey – before juxtaposing them against the *jihādi* movements and ideologies. His discussion of Sayyid Qutb (67–68) is brief but nuanced, lacking the refinement obvious in Calvert's work. He agrees with Calvert in placing Qutb (and Mawdudi) in the specific context of the postcolonial ideological struggles in the Muslim world (116). Much of the material in the second chapter is similar to Esposito's discussion in his *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, published in 2002.

The Future of Islam truly takes off in the third chapter in which the author discusses the issue of reform in Islam. After placing them within the tradition of renewal (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*), Esposito examines the works of contemporary Muslim reform-oriented scholars and activists – such as Tariq Ramadan, Ali Gomaa, Amr Khaled, Mustafa Cerić, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Majid, Timothy Winter, Farhat Hashmi, Amina Wadud, Abdullah Gymanstiar, and Heba Raouf. These personalities have contributed to a wide variety of questions and discussions in contemporary Islamic discourse – suicide bombing, democracy, religious pluralism, gender roles, gender equality, and living as a Muslim in the West. It is interesting that Esposito relies primarily on the Internet-based sources in discussing these scholars. This demonstrates the presence of Muslim reformers on the web, but it leaves the reader with a feeling that the chapter could have been researched further and deeper. Esposito refers to several writings in Arabic, but he uses a somewhat puzzling, and sometimes incorrect, transliteration. Despite these shortcomings, Esposito is on a more solid footing than Hafez while discussing al-Qaradawi.

The fourth, and final chapter of *The Future of Islam* relies quite a bit on Esposito and Dalia Mogahed's *Who Speaks for Islam*, published in 2007. Yet, he also introduces some new material, including a discussion on America and the Muslim world in the context of President Obama's election. Esposito is not a utopian, but he is cautiously optimistic that the relation between America and the West, on the one hand, and Islam and Muslims, on the other, will get better. He suggests that Jews, Christians, and Muslims (as well as followers of other religions), no matter where they

live, need to embrace greater pluralism. Indeed, this picture, which Esposito projects unmistakably of diverse believers living in a globalized world, is a powerful answer to the West vs. Islam, and us vs. them – dichotomies created by those who believe in the clash of civilizations on both sides of the supposed tectonic lines. The book singles out two Muslim interfaith initiatives aimed at addressing the issue of religious pluralism: the Amman Message[3] and A Common Word.[4] Both Muslims and non-Muslims need to learn more about these two important proclamations (or documents). More importantly, their lessons ought to be converted into practice. On this last note, Esposito ends the book by emphasizing the role of public diplomacy and communication.

The three books complement each other rather well. Each book has a different emphasis, enriching and addressing the issues the other two neglect or do not concentrate on. What are the prospects for reform and democratization in the Muslim world, according to Hafez and Esposito? The questions would seem redundant given the turbulent 2011 and the Arab Spring. Yet, many of these queries are still in the air. Both of these authors would most likely agree that the possibilities for real transformation and democratization in the Muslim world are there. Neither of them would be utterly surprised with the Arab Spring, though none of them predicted it either. Both books draw on the parallels from histories of the West and the Muslim world to highlight the similarities that these histories suggest. Yet, both of them cautions that it would be too simplistic to merely transpose one history on the other. Calvert's *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* reminds us that a call for reform carries within itself the possibility of radicalization and, potentially, violence. It is a sobering account, but one which Hafez highlights in his book equally well and in a broader, comparative context. Esposito's book charts a possible way to the future, built on mutual recognition, respect, and pluralism. He is not naïve to believe that it would be easy to arrive there, but he – at the same time – points to the realities that could open up the door to such a future. These books also reminds us of a very important lesson – while it is relatively easy and attractive to reduce the complex phenomena to simplistic images and caricatures, we should be well advised to pay attention to the context, nuances, and depth of various traditions, their histories, and their realities. Methodologically, all three books succeed in imparting this valuable message.

Finally, from an educator's point of view, it is worthy to include a note on these books' suitability for college and university teaching. John

Calvert's book is an indispensable reading and reference in a course on the history of modern Islamic activism and revivalism, especially those focusing on history of radical ideas (not only in the Islamic context). John Esposito's book is highly recommended in various courses on Islam, particularly general overviews and introductions, as well as those dealing with the US (West)-Muslim relations. Lastly, Kai Hafez's book could be a recommended reading in comparative history of modernity and democratization, mainly in relation to the issues of reform and radicalism in the Islamic world.

Notes

1. www.freedomhouse.org.
2. www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/en.
3. www.ammanmessage.com.
4. http://acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=faq#link7.

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