Where East Meets West: Appropriating the Islamic Encounter for a Spiritual-Cultural Revival, rev. ed.

Mona Abul-Fadl

Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010. hbk. and pbk. 95 pages.

This short and concise book is presented as an important brick in the foundation of what had been designated the "Western Thought Project." As Mona Abul-Fadl has indicated, the aim of this project was to encourage an "active" and "critical" presence of the Muslim intellect as well as promoting the "Islamization of knowledge" (vii). This was rendered necessary in light of the dilemmas facing Muslims everywhere as they strive to reconcile their religious conscience with the historical realities of a modern Western consciousness. Abul-Fadl optimistically and ambitiously perceives possibilities of shaping a "Muslim discourse on conscience" within a cooperative framework with the West – in order, as she put it, to "evolve together the terms of a new global consciousness which is inclusive" (xi). This presumably would entail a dialogue, not with the West in general, but with a particular variant of it that harbors religious commonalities with Islam in terms of the givens of God, humans, history, and revelation. Abul-Fadl seeks to change the terms of the encounter from the political and the economic to the intellectual and the *cultural* (xiv). Summoning the intellectual community, primarily of Muslims but non-Muslims as well, is the prerequisite for the bid to renegotiate the terms of this proposed global encounter, and she asserts that the "fate of our civilization lies in the balance of culture, not power" (1). Such a "simple truth" is the premise of her study.

The book is comprised of six chapters and an epilogue. In the first chapter, the author attempts to make the case for the "cultural imperative," which she perceives as the necessary mode of interaction between the dominant West and other power centers – actual or potential – as a function of culture and not merely politics (1). Her attempt to sooth the concerns of participants in the West that such a challenge, however "paradoxical" as she admits, "need not necessarily imply a loss for the West" (3). It may require a good measure of Western naiveté to accept Abu-Fadl's proposition that Islam's proverbial capacity to accommodate diversity can contribute to the "sanctification" of the culture of the West, not to its

"subversion" (3). Nevertheless, the very concept of culture is contested, and in fact, may very well be perceived as a component of power itself.

Abul-Fadl indicates that the Western Thought Project signifies "an interest by Muslims in the West" (18). Yet, if Islam and Muslims are the closest "cultural agents" to the West, as she claims, then this may not allow much room for detached observation of those in the West. In fact, Abul-Fadl stresses that any rethought encounter with the West should take place in terms drawn from what she calls the "*tawhidi*" (monotheistic) episteme (23), or the restitution of "values to their due measure" (61) – and where distinctions are made in terms of "morality" not "history" (26). All this was to take place not in any form of a polarized encounter (24) but within some kind of acknowledged consciousness of a common space, which would transcend politics for culture (61–62). The challenge to this *tawhidi* perspective then becomes "how to subscribe to the rules of the game without being caught up in them" (62). To a large extent, this is what Islamic Iran, as an empirical case, has been adept at doing, and the Western response, as well as that of the Arabs and Sunni Muslims, has been clearly hostile to. Abul-Fadl's point is if Muslims embark on what it is they wish to do, and the West refuses to concede grounds for understandable reasons (46), the entire context simply becomes one of polarized power politics, with culture being one of its components. For when Abul-Fadl presents the *tawhidi* episteme and paradigm as a deconstructive project of the West on terms other than the latter's own (46), this can only become a likely recipe for conflict, or suspicion to say the least. The *tawhidi* episteme becomes in fact a political statement, which would not allow much room for Abul-Fadl's cultural idealism (70–71).

The risk associated with this project however, is not simply whether the West may or may not accept its terms, or that it may fail in its cultural drive in favor of politics. Rather it is in what it may actually succeed in accomplishing. The entire project may simply turn out to be a source of inadvertent depoliticization that would render it susceptible to manipulation by the West in ways that would defeat its very purpose of changing the terms of interaction. Prohibiting the *hijab* in France, for instance, becomes a cause célèbre for Muslims and the issue of the day. In fact, this decision by French authorities may not necessarily be driven by hostility to Islam and Muslims or constitute a dent in liberal secularism (76); this might instead be setting a *cultural agenda* that would get Muslims to focus on one particular issue or cause rather than another– the very agenda in fact that Abul-Fadl, albeit for different reasons, proposes. Thus for example, the most important topic in the discourse of regaining the self and/or identity becomes the *hijab*

and gender issues rather than, say, the Palestine cause. Aware of Muslims' obsession with issues of women, the West simply throws them what they want. In the process, Palestine is forgotten and everybody is happy – a fool's paradise of sorts! Islamists/culturalists have their moral cause. Muslim rulers give their own lip service to the cause of the veil, occupying a representative position as cultural custodians of their own people's values, while refocusing their attention on something else less risky (for example, the veil rather than Israel, or their tyranny and treason). So is the case with the West, as well as Israel; both recognize which buttons to push in order to get Muslims to jump, so that if it is not one thing then it is another – or better yet, how to get Muslims to engage in fragmenting intra-cultural wars within their own societies. This way, the entire, presumably integrative Western Thought Project of *culture* and Islamization of knowledge is subverted into its opposite project of *culturalism* – culture's disintegrative nemesis.

As an example of such subversion one need consider the tactics that someone like Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im had suggested. One tactic would be for Western countries to engage in parallel discourses (that is, set the agenda) in their own societies (for example, issues of women in general but the veil in specific) – not necessarily with the intention of changing or accomplishing anything as far as *they* are concerned, but simply to enable "internal actors" in Muslim societies to point to a similar process taking place elsewhere. Then Muslims might start engaging in issues that perhaps should not be higher up on their list of priorities. Crosscultural dialogue would then be conducted in order to offer insights and help with strategies of internal discourse to promote universal acceptance of the agenda and, in the process, highlight "shared moral and philosophical positions."[1] The purpose is to alter attitudes and perhaps focus say from Palestine to the veil. Such is power politics couched in subversive culturalism.

Despite the best of intentions, Abul-Fadl has inadvertently planted the seeds of subversion in her very own methodology. Politics, by all means, ought to be informed by culture, but it is politics that determines options, sets agendas, organizes, and mobilizes. An approach that presumably honors "the word more than the sword" (60), as Abul-Fadl suggests, is certainly laudable but not without its risks. For to depoliticize is to disarm; and as Benjamin Franklin once said "[t]hose who beat swords into plowshares usually end up plowing for those who don't."

Endnote

1. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naʿim, *Islam and the Secular State*: *Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 27.

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