Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire

Hamid Dabashi
London and New York: Routledge, 2008. 303 pages.

By this provocative work – to say the least – Dabashi makes a quite timely intervention in the direction that the new discourse on Islam has recently taken, especially among progressive-liberal Muslim scholars. Unlike many others who are attracted to liberalism of various sorts, Dabashi remains

closer to the socialist lineage to formulate a fervent anti-imperialist critique and struggle for justice in the line of liberation theologies of Gustavo Gutierrez and Joseph H. Cone. There have also been a few other Muslims pursuing a similar endeavor, such as Shabbir Akhtar and Farid Esack. Yet Dabashi, while retaining the basic sense of liberation theology, "articulation of the meaning of faith based on commitment to abolish injustice" (p. 254), is rather after a *theodicy* for our post-civilizational times. In his words, the aim is "to investigate the specifically Islamic manners of opposing the imperial upsurge in the aftermath of the 'Islam and West binary opposition'" (p. 2).

Several arguments suffuse the book as recurring themes, articulated in conversations with contemporary social and political philosophers from Emmanuel Levinas to Giorgio Agamben, and mostly animated by poststructuralist and postcolonial sensibilities. Still, Dabashi is careful to distance himself from them as he clearly says "we are not postmodern" (p. 168) as well as "either way we are out" [of this debate between modernists and postmodernists] (p. 105). Yet some of such sensibilities surface in the most evident way, as he is cautious not to create a meta-narrative himself, or in his approach to the well-worn "Islam and the West" cliché, as constructs of outmoded civilizational thinking. Similarly, while as a legitimate reaction to colonialist plunder, he sees Islamic ideology (Islamism) as a liberation theology from Afghani onwards; at a time when ideology cannot produce enough synergy to resist the new amorphous empire, a new theology as a theodicy is much needed. This theodicy does not produce evils to construct itself, but willingly embraces its shadows of doubt and welcomes its others (p. 168).

Another quite imaginative argument developed from similar sensibilities is the way Dabashi lays out Shi`ism quintessential paradox and, more broadly, that of Islam as proto-Shi`ism (p. 188). That is, as a religion of protest Islam fails morally when it succeeds politically. Thus, Islam as the ethos of speaking truth to power can never be in power. This effectively claims the messianic moment in Islam; quite reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's democracy-to-come.

The specifics of each of the seven chapters elaborate and elucidate these major themes and paradoxes. In the first chapter, "Resisting the Empire," Dabashi aptly shows how despite the confusion of 9/11, the predicament of the poor in the "West" cannot be separated from those outside under the smokescreen of civilizational divides. The new mode of capital cannot keep colonial and capital apart any more, and it no longer has a center of operation. Hence the end of Islamic ideology as we know it; for it had emerged as a direct and combative response to European colonialism in order to turn a

polyfocal medieval faith into a singular site of resistance; and its principal interlocutor, "the West," is now long gone.

The subsequent chapter, "The End of Islamic Ideology" expounds on the story of Islamism as a combative anti-colonial ideology and its inevitable – but welcome – end. The Islamic revolution of Iran, contrary to what many think, is the effective end of militant Islamism due to the evidence of its institutional failure and ideological exhaustion. Here Dabashi presents his particular narrative of Islamism with a specific focus on Iran, and Ali Shariati appears as the one who delivers Shi`ism to its full ideological formation with a sense of global significance.

"Blindness and Insight," the following chapter, focuses on Abdolkarim Soroush and Tariq Ramadan as two prominent examples of Muslim ideologues that try to talk to a dead interlocutor, namely, "The West." In fact he charges both with refetishizing that colonial concoction. He juxtaposes them with Shariati and Malcolm X and argues that they brought the latter two's revolutionary projects to a premature and forced conclusion.

The next chapter is dedicated to analyzing the new shape of globalization. Alongside exposing the inadvertent racism and provincial imagination of so-called progressive and liberal voices, Dabashi points toward alternative imaginations from W. E. B. DuBois and Malcolm X that could be worked out in their defiance of the imperial mapping of the world and decentering of the American empire. Contours of the emerging planetary reconception of the globe also necessitates that Islam relocate and reconceive itself for emerging modes of revolutionary resistance to planetary imperialism, since Islam is no more a meta-narrative of resistance as a civilizational other of the "West" and all essentialized resistances are outdated.

The chapter on *ta'ziyah*, "The Shi'i Passion Play," presents it as a redemptive ritual and the single most important theatrical manifestation of Islam as a religion of protest, which cannot be ignored in formulation of a liberation theodicy. It collapses the dual supposition of the moral and political communities together, disallowing the narrative and normative separation of the two. Evident in its asymmetrical mimesis is an exemplary model of a liberation theology that does not degenerate into the absolutism of conviction.

The next chapter sets out to lay the groundwork for a "Liberation Theodicy," the precise contours of which are still not clear; however, its sites of disposition can be identified. Nothwithstanding the successive failures of Islam's political reconstitution, Dabashi finds hope in Palestinian and Lebanese resistance movements for polyvocality and multiculturalism, as well as in the transnational Islamic presence in Europe, which proves beyond all

doubt that Islam is no longer limited to any definable geographic space; hence the end of the "Islamic world." A striking feature of this theodicy is his conception of religions as not world religions, but as religions in the world (worldliness).

Perhaps one of the most striking features of Dabashi's book is his attempt to reclaim Malcolm X for Muslim political theology and thought in an era when Islam has turned into a free-floating signifier. In Malcolm's character the most critical link between the alienated colonial corners of capitalist modernity and the disenfranchised communities within its metropolitan center is gathered; thus the psychological divide manufactured by Orientalism between "the West and the Rest" is removed.

Dabashi concludes by pointing out the sites of resistance in the form of Islamic liberation theodicy. It will liberate Islam from afflictions of violence and institutionalized fanaticism; will link Islam to its multifocal, multicultural, and cosmopolitan disposition of its premodern times without any fear of conversing with other cultures.

This treatise of Islamic resistance to empire makes a compelling case for the necessity of remapping our geographic imagination and offers a quite original political theology for post-civilizational and post-Islamist times corresponding to a new mode of capital; however, it might be a target of anti-functionalists for its somewhat less worked-out theorization of the link between capital and culture. Scorching language from which Dabashi never restrains himself when criticizing Muslim writers might also upset some. Yet this work does definitely represent quite a new way, for Muslims and sympathetics alike, to conceive of religion, history, the *modus operandi* of empire, and the past and the future of Islamic resistance.

Halil Ibrahim Yenigun
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Politics
University of Virginia, Charlottesville