

### Book Review

## Islam and the Middle East: The Aesthetics of a Political Discourse

By Mona Abul-Fadl. Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1990, 61pp.

In her essay, Abul-Fadl argues that the dominant paradigm in the study of the Middle East is inadequate, a view which leads to her assertion that a shift to a new paradigm is required. She maintains that her study is an attempt to create such an alternative outlook, one which surmounts the contemporary ruling paradigm. She suggests that this new paradigm be based solidly on Islam.

To begin with, she argues that scholarship on the Middle East must admit the opinion of a native mind and method of argument to the medium of discourse, which itself must become more sensitive and more authentically pluralist if it is to be at all exemplary of historical civilizations and of world truth. Without doubt, such a fresh approach will take some time to develop, for this endeavor requires the rejuvenation of minds and capabilities. As this process begins to take place, Muslims will gradually become more eloquent and capable of readjusting themselves into identifiable and feasible flows so that they can build new schools of thought. She writes that the essay takes the Islamic dimension as a continual factor which goes beyond the transformation of politics at any given age (p. 2), and that acceptance and awareness of variance and multiplicity in the world of politics can only be *bona fide* and valuable if it is anchored in fidelity to an encompassing congruity which both permeates and surpasses this conglomeration. The encompassing congruity is *tawhīd*. This paradigm is designed by the *tawhīdī* episteme and assumes at the outset that those modes, foundations, and parlance are obtained from an Islamic worldview based firmly on the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Abul-Fadl reminds her readers that as a designation, the term "Middle East" is itself dubious and questionable. She uses it to denote a region which is more noticeably specified by its culture than by its territory. The concise nucleus of the region is linguistically Arabic and religiously Muslim, as over nine-tenths of its population shares in the principal cultural marks, values, faith, and customary manners of living. However, current Western political literature on the region has stressed divergence and has insisted in viewing

the Middle East through the paradigm of the mosaic which, according to her, is abusive to a majority of the region's inhabitants.

One of the myths maintained about the Middle East is its non-identity, its appearance as merely an "accident of geography as much as of history" (p. 9). Abul-Fadl points out that this belief had its political roots as well as its political connotations. It became "a convenient tool for justifying balkanization and for rationalizing the rule of minorities" (p. 9). What she is suggesting here is that the Islamic dimension was ignored not by chance but on purpose. Why was this done, one may ask. She argues that it was done so that harmony and sense could be brought into an "anarchic region by its subordination to a principle of rationality—and a principle of authority" (p. 9). Hence, the notion of the nation-state became "a principle and a weaning ground for a fragmenting politics. Metaphorically, the perceived chaos and disorder has usually been sublimated into the seductive vision of the mosaic" (p. 9).

Given the intrinsic unsettling capacity of contemporary Middle Eastern politics, Abul-Fadl maintains that there is a necessity for a theoretical framework which can organize exceptional or distinctive components as well as those factors which hold some probability for joining. She declares that the Islamic dimension arises to accomplish these conditions, for it contributes "a framework for differentiation as well as for trans-regional or intra-regional association" (p. 11). Citing a need to establish the signification of Islam for the Middle East in a sociocultural and historical outlook, she nonetheless warns her readers that the statement that Islam comprises the determinant to comprehending the politics and history of the Middle East may seem a bit odd. This pertains to an outsider to the area and, more widely, given the governing secular civilization of the epoch, it might even pertain to many "cultured" insiders as well.

The author remarks that the unquestionable assumption by Western students is that they should ignore religion while attempting to fathom the cultures and the peoples of different regions. In the case of the Middle East, she laments that at best the Islamic element "may be dealt with perfunctorily as an aspect of the past, needed to fill out the background of the canvas, but it would by no means figure as pertinent, far less integral, to the political comprehension of the modern setting" (p. 12). Abul-Fadl adds that this perspective is only augmented by the vagueness in the specialized literature which is itself "torn between the attempts to deny the impact and hence the relevance of Islam to history on the one hand, and to revivify an interred Islam and attribute all the foibles in the history of Muslim societies to its contaminations" (p. 12).

After stating that the advent of the Muslim community has been well

documented, Abul-Fadl wonders why the use of these ample foundations in current political scholarship leaves so much to be desired. From the very outset, Islam furnished a belief possessing moral ramifications for the individual and society. It formed the *raison d'être* of the state and was the "principle of solidarity" in the political society. She contends that any improvised dichotomies incorporated between "public" and "private" was "a meaningless and derogatory redundancy in the *tawhīdī* paradigm" (pp. 16-7).

In addition to this inability to satisfactorily understand Islam as a religion which consolidates society and faith, one could refer to another reason which gave plausibility to misplaced analogies and bolstered the ruling paradigm. The contemporary politics of the region have been a function of a "prismic" polity as explained by Riggs. She states that the "sala model" developed by Riggs in the 1960s to understand political development still maintains its analytical value (p. 17). In brief, she explains what this model means for the Middle East: after independence, these countries were primarily staffed with Westernized elements alienated from popular culture. These people were "caught in the twilight zone of a post-traditional, pre-modern culture, they would seek the instruments of the modern age, the legacy of the colonial era, to model their societies on the Western metropole" (p. 18). In such conditions, it was not surprising that the prevailing idiom of Middle Eastern politics would become secular. But beneath the surface was "a far more complex core conditioned by the multiple facets of the living Islamic heritage" (p. 18).

The author then continues her essay with a subheading "Islam as Civilization: Form and Essence," in which she states that Islamic civilization had the capability not only to accommodate variety, but that it would actually prosper from such variety. Islam had and continues to have a positive attitude towards knowledge, for it has always upheld learning as a value innate to the faith. Islam absorbed and synthesized various elements and united them in a fresh legacy for humanity, a legacy which "kept the torch burning through the ten centuries during which Europe was shrouded in medieval slumber" (p. 20). Here the author is echoing the familiar sentiment of those Muslim scholars who turn back to the historical achievements of their forefathers with great nostalgia and pride.

After this, Abul-Fadl proceeds to briefly discuss the affairs of the Islamic state. She says that the *khilāfah* was the ummah's definitive mark of its political and historical solidarity. The Shari'ah was the *raison d'être* of the polity and the base of its public order. The Islamic state has no existence separate from the community. The authority of the state is not original; rather it is gained. The experience of the state in Islamic history bears little resemblance to the modern European state's experience. Abul-Fadl acknowledges that there have

been indulgences and deviations in the power politics of the state (p. 24).

Unlike earlier interventions in the Muslim world, the impact of Western colonialism was intense, and it extended to the actual spiritual and structural underpinnings of Islamic society. The progress of colonialism was resisted, however, by what Abul-Fadl contends is an intense tradition in Islam of resistance to foreign aggression, one which has singular formations. In the urban areas, such resistance was commonly led by the ulama or the imams, who are said to be the natural leaders. The legacy of the colonial experience was that Islamic society descended into a state of anomie which was the outcome as much as the root of an emerging "confused and amorphous" society. Nevertheless, the colonial impact had "not gone far enough to eradicate the muted ideal of community: the limitations on its success were the measure and testing ground of the enduring resilience of the historical Muslim core in the region" (p. 34).

She concludes that the ideal of the Islamic community was too strongly rooted to be practically abolished (p. 35). Abul-Fadl explains the predicament of the Shari'ah in our age as resulting from its being neglected by the modern nation-state. However, the demotion of the Shari'ah in the modern political establishment did not result in the abolition of its cultural significance, for it is the "ethico-legal matrix that pervaded the life of the community and imbued it with its sense for what constituted legitimacy and what did not" (p. 36). Thus, the living Muslim community outlasted the disintegration and the mutilation of the Islamic society's political expression. It is this community which has risen periodically to contribute the catalyst for the rejuvenation of both polity and society (p. 36).

After making this point, Abul-Fadl reminds her readers that this drive for self-revitalization is indigenous to historical Islam. It was orientalism that deprived many Muslims and non-Muslims of the ability to recognize and understand the human authenticity behind the framework, while the modern social science specialists repudiated the appropriateness of an Islamic referent (p. 38). She then informs the scholars that the endurance of the Islamic world as Islamic is predicated not only on the tumult of activism but also on the steady and complicated intellectual struggle which must construct the required Islamic vision (p. 39).

In her conclusion, she deplores the scholarly attitude of viewing the Islamic resurgence as a superficial demonstration of more secular complaints located in the characteristic injustice found in the Third World, of which the Muslim world forms a significant part. These scholars perceived a Western failure in the modernization efforts which, according to them, led to a natural regress into traditional methods of factiousness. As defeated societies fall back into primordial fashions in search of security, there was nothing particularly Islamic

about the conduct of these disillusioned Muslims. Therefore, the argument was that a return to Islam was twice regressive.

Many members of the scholarly community are not willing to admit that the Islamic dimension is an integral part of modern Muslim societies. The Middle East is chiefly a historical and sociocultural reality which has conserved an animate culture during the past fourteen centuries. Ignoring the Islamic dimension will lead to distortions in analysis and research. Remaining in touch with reality and relating the Islamic dimension with the modern situation is needed.

In her book, Abul-Fadl has come up with a convincing argument for incorporating the Islamic dimension in all inquiries relating to the Middle East. Her arguments are sound and her writing style is highly engaging. It would have been better if she could have quoted more authors when trying to prove her points. For example, when she mentions perceived failures of the Western concepts of development and modernization, she could have given examples from the rich literature dealing with the widespread disillusionment caused by development. Abul-Fadl could also have done more to get support for her arguments from other like-minded scholars.

Nevertheless, this is an important contribution to the literature and it can be expected that she will continue this discussion in the next book of this series. There is still much work to be done on this very important subject. Surely, this is not the final essay we will find coming from the author's pen. It is hoped that she will continue her writing with the same determination and sincerity she has shown in this book. Overall, this is an excellent inquiry and it is highly recommended for all who might be interested in the Middle East and in Islam in the modern age.

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