



Islamic Fundamentalism

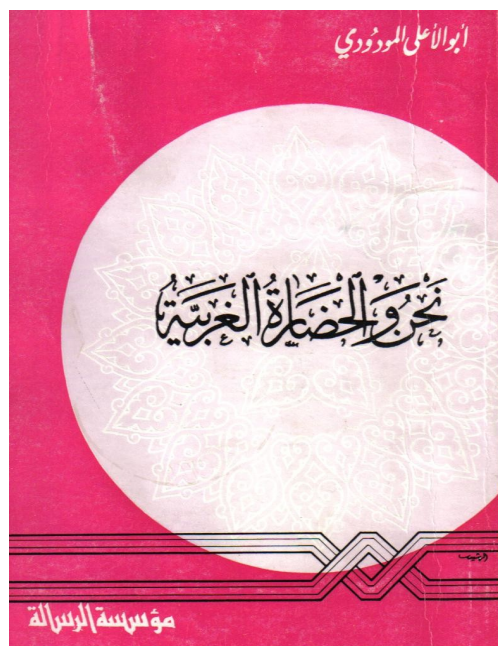
Old cultures between Westernization and Easternization

Reviewed by

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz*

Reducing Islamic fundamentalism to an expression of terrorism while ignoring the grievances may only deepen conflict, not resolve it, maintains Beverley Milton-Edwards in her introduction. Therefore she - a reader in politics and international affairs in the School of Politics at Queen's University, Belfast - has researched the development of the problem since World War II.

In chapter one, she summarizes the history of Islam, touching on the expansion of Islam, the global rising of Europe, the age of empire building in Muslim countries and the era of national independence. In chapter two, she examines the movements of national independence and secular rule in a variety of Muslim countries and the role of the Islamists in helping to shape the political discourse during the modern age. In chapter three, she addresses the fallout of secular dictatorships that denied freedom and democracy to the masses. Here she concentrates on the stirrings of revivalism and fundamentalist thinking in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In chapter five, she appraises the emergence of a new global political order and its impact on Islamism. In chapter six, the devastating consequences of a new cultural hegemony on Muslims are examined after al Qaeda's attacks on America. Finally, in chapter seven she offers her conclusions.



We And The Western Civilization by
Abu al-Ala al-Maududi (1903-1979):
A classical text of Islamic fundamentalism, ed. in Bairut, Lebanon, 1983

Rather than being geographically specific and focusing on the regional heartland of Islam - the Middle East - the focus of her book is the whole Muslim world, the countries where the majority of the population are Muslims. Suffice it to say, during her chosen period of time, since 1945, the citizens of these countries have been subject to a range of forces: foreign rule and occupation, movements for independence, rising nationalism, secularism, growing Islamist tendencies, reform, revolution and repression.

The reader might argue that all these factors were already at work following World War I, and so the reason for taking the end of World War II as a starting point for this study remains unclear. That said, I will discuss three of the author's major insights.

Milton-Edwards, who became known with her book *Islamic Politics in Palestine* in 1996, leads us to a first major insight for the period after World War II:

"The displacement of secular colonists by the secular nationalist elite that dominated the postindependent and revolutionary regimes of the Muslim world was read as a declaration of war by many Islamic fundamentalists. Islamic principles of governance and rule, through consultation and jurisprudence, were abandoned by the new elites. Instead, they established power through coercion, often by *coups d'état*, and relied heavily, once in power, on the strong arm of the military to quash local opposition and stifle democratic impulses irrespective of their origin. In the name of national populism they promoted 'cults of personality' and ruled the Muslim population with an iron fist. Islam was seen by such figures as an impediment to progress and development. There was little room for the public dimension of faith tied to power in the slavishly interpreted Western models of modernisation, actualised in so many Muslim states during this period. Instead, the faith, its symbols, leaders and institutions, would be swallowed up by the state, leaving its citizens devoid of a voice that was not sanctioned by the 'regime.' Islam was employed to lend legitimacy and potent symbolism in the eyes of the popular mass to tyrannical leaders and despots. The independence of the religious establishment was severely weakened and undermined. Those who dared to oppose the state were thrown in prison, tortured and executed as traitors and enemies of the state. In this 'Brave New World' Islam's activists hid in the shadows, languished in jails without trial and were denounced as obstacles to progress (p. 32)."

Furthermore, Milton-Edwards, who dedicated this study to her mentor, James Piscatori, points out that being modern and Muslim was viewed as an oxymoron. The secular project left little room for Islam. The Muslim past was repudiated, while secular Muslim leaders appealed to their mass publics.

The leaders of such regimes, as she says, also undertook major cultural, educational and political campaigns to "convert" the Muslim masses to the populist anthems of socialism and secular nationalism. This worked on the assumption that Islam threatened the secularist ambition for modernization. Enlightenment thinking, with its emphasis on rationality, the separation of church and state, and democracy, had little room for the representatives of an ancient faith system increasingly regarded as old-fashioned and irrelevant.

Here comes a second basic insight: this process of exclusion ignored the rich history of Muslim societies characterized by a de facto separation of power between mosque and state.

Finally, the third major insight is this: such societies also reveal evidence of an earlier Muslim acceptance of the doctrines of reason and scientific rationality that the single-minded secularists ignored. For most of these new leaders, unless the fundamentalists were going to support them and walk in their shadow, they were branded as an enemy within, one that would hold back the progress that might be possible for modern Muslim societies in the post-war era.

Milton-Edwards is basically right. The secular nationalists tried to be modern but in an exaggerated manner. Thus, they often acted like copycats while ignoring positive elements from the past of their own lands.

The author's use of simple terms such as "secularists" and "fundamentalists" makes this study an easy read. But it also has clear disadvantages in not differentiating the actors enough, for instance the Islamic modernists and reformists. The attached bibliography is helpful, though it includes no works written in the great languages of Islam. This is the more astonishing as there is a vast Arabic literature on Islamic fundamentalism since the 1950s, the very time frame that is the focus of this study. The short chronology is oriented toward the contemporary period (note: in 1922 Turkey abolished the Sultanate, not the Caliphate, which was abolished 16 months later).

The challenges of the past and present, summarizes Milton-Edwards in her conclusions, stem from the vast changes that have beset Muslim countries across the globe - often (though not always) as a result of the impact of Western ideas, projects and political domination. Most conservative explanations of the fundamentalist phenomenon in Islam, however, ignore this explanation. Muslims are blamed for their own failings and the failure of their societies.

Two thoughts arise. First, Muslims, like all others, are to be held accountable for their actions. The old blame game towards the West does not help them. Second, if we talk about historical responsibility and the failed Westernization or modernization after World War II, we have to consider its opposite during the Cold War as well: Easternization. Moscow's influence on Middle Eastern countries receives very short shrift in this study. The odd mixture of Eastern and Western European influences during the Cold War on the Middle East and the complex modern means of suppression led to heavy burdens for democracy and development there.

We can simply recall the Egyptian case: two decades of Arab Socialism (and brutal persecution of Islamic activists) and two decades of the harsh Western *infitah* model or open-door policy that produced an unseen chaos in that country (and a more subtle persecution of Islamists). Nevertheless, those were the choices of the Egyptians; and to a certain degree, the blockades to a more original path to modernity were homemade. Milton-Edwards deals a little too gently with the responsibility of current local politicians and their Islamist opponents. The majority of them are surely not preoccupied, as she claims, with prosaic and mundane politics internal to their own states and societies.

Islam today has grown out of its local, national and regional framework into a global, international and transnational phenomenon. One cannot limit it anymore to a contemplative local or regional movement. Some elements in this religion - for instance, the militant jihadization, its worldwide mission toward infidels, and its self-understanding as the supreme and final revelation - can be easily used to advocate a war against the Other, especially against the West.

The lack of a concept of citizenship in Islam also plays an important role. As profound as some of the conclusions by Milton-Edwards appear to be, it is wise not to overlook those questionable ideas that are advocated by the prevailing stream of Islamic fundamentalism, with its internal tensions between the more peaceful reformers and the more violent activists. Which side is going to gain the upper hand in a given society or region remains to be seen.

Beverley Milton-Edwards: *Islamic Fundamentalism since 1945*. Routledge, 2005. 158 pages, with chronology, bibliography, glossary and index. \$20.95, paperback.

**Dr. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz is author of Gold, Bankers, and Diplomats: A History of the German Orient Bank 1906-46 and editor of Germany and the Middle East in the Cold War, and author of German Islam Policy, From Empire to Present (forthcoming).*