

Review Article

## Squaring the Circle in the Study of the Middle East: Islamic Liberalism Reconsidered<sup>1</sup>

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"Hail to thee blithe spirit, Bird thou never wert!" It was with a note of elation that the Muslim reader greeted the publication of *Islamic Liberalism* in anticipation of a feat that was not to be. It looked as if Professor Binder, who has successfully engaged the sympathies of many Muslims,<sup>2</sup> was about to crown his thirty-year-odd career on the study of the Middle East with a breakthrough. Expectations were heightened by a timely coincidence. With the appearance of another compact masterpiece constituting the refinement of a craft by an old guard of the castle,<sup>3</sup> it looked as if *Islamic Liberalism* was poised to storm the castle from within. There was evidently somebody at the Chicago University Press (which published both books) who combined a keen feel for the market with a flair for irony. To an audience drilled to the tune of militant Islam and its sombre variations, the mere conception of the idea of an Islamic liberalism promised a shift in the paradigm of understanding a political Islam. Introduced on a note beckoning to the significance, the necessity, indeed the possibility of a dialogue between Islam and the West, it would moreover raise all kinds of expectations about the canon in both the Western academy and the civilizational encounter. These expectations can only be gauged by the persistent undertones of a countertenor that seemed to be forever churning out more of the same.<sup>4</sup> Instead of succumbing to the seductive discourse on the "rage of Islam" and feeding

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<sup>1</sup>This article is excerpted from an extended critique inspired by Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Theories* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>See review article by Parvez Manzoor followed by Binder's response, "Islamic Liberalism and Beyond," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (March 1990): 77-88.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup>Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 1990), originally delivered as the 19th Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities entitled "Western Civilization: A View from the East."

into Kipling's subversive logic of the passions that kept East and West apart, it looked as if now with *Islamic Liberalism* Sweet Reason would prevail and open the way on this side of the Atlantic too for exploring the "promises of Islam."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Binder's latest work does not live up to its promise. Instead of giving a push to a new kind of expertise which is slowly emerging in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, he attempts to square a circle for, while pursuing the truth,<sup>6</sup> he overlooked the grounds for freedom and democracy within the contemporary Muslim world, misread the obstacles, and mistook the signs. These flaws were not due to his lack of expertise or theoretical grounding, but rather ironically to his very professionalism as well as to his ideological reading of the text in his pursuit of deconstructing the modern Muslim mind within the context of the developing polity (and the politics of development) in the Middle East. By using state-of-the-art sociological, political, philosophical, and orientalist thought to sample his subject matter, to apply his chosen principles to the process of deconstruction and interpretation, and to deploy his grid to screen out those issues deemed relevant in defining the developmental setting, he has produced an unabashedly Western reading of the shaping currents in a cross-section of contemporary Muslim thought.

On the positive side, his search for a valid paradigm with which to understand the contemporary Middle East's politics and prospects is an original work in a field not usually entered by area specialists and political scientists. Many do not have the intellectual investment it calls for, and these same people remain more interested in the empirical priorities and pragmatic orientations of the American academy.<sup>7</sup>

*Islamic Liberalism* may be taken as a sequel to *The Ideological Revolution*

<sup>5</sup>See Roger Garaudy, *Promesses de L'Islam* (Paris: Ed. Seuil, 1983).

<sup>6</sup>A revealing quotation about "truth" lying in the reading and not in the text, and an admission that "constitutionally, reading is misreading" [Vincent Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983)] might tell us something about Binder's implicit views on the matter. *Islamic Liberalism*, fn. p. 371.

<sup>7</sup>The eighties, though, saw a resuscitation of interest in the metatheoretical level among political historians and political sociologists that is reflected in a new genre of publications. See Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrielides, eds., *Statecraft in the Middle East: Oil, Historical Memory and Popular Culture* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991); and Louis Cantori and Ilya Harik, eds., *Critical Paradigms in the Study of Middle East Politics* (forthcoming). The initiative to explore alternatives to the political sociology of the region was taken by French scholars such as Bertrand Badie, *Les Deux Etats: Pouvoir et Societ  en Occident et en Terre d'Islam* (Paris: Fayard, 1987). For a critical overview of current scholarship from an Islamic perspective, see Abul-Fadl, *Towards Understanding the Middle East: The Islamic Dimension*, (forthcoming).

in the Middle East<sup>8</sup> and as the consummation of an approach conceived over the course of many years. More significant, however, is the intention to pursue an academic purpose with an eye on higher purposes and a sense for the urgency to establish the grounds for a realistically optimistic encounter between two world cultures. This certainly adds to the work's credentials, although its credibility depends on the solidness of the grounds. How far he has succeeded in achieving his objectives is another matter.

Binder has brought together a vast body of material in order to synthesize perspectives from many sources in an intelligent and intelligible manner. Despite its obvious difficulty and sophistication and the fact that its primary appeal is likely to remain confined to a selective audience of a more philosophical and theoretical bent, in its own range and depth, its methodological and hermeneutic consciousness, and its sheer empathy with its subject matter and interlocutors, *Islamic Liberalism* is a definite enrichment of and positive resource to its field. Middle Eastern studies in particular stands to gain from his excellent scholarship and from the interdisciplinary and intercultural perspectives it offers.

However, one must not forget the book's ideological constraints, for these detract from its objectivity and its reliability as a guide to that prospective evolution. Working on the premise of the universality of culture (specifically the culture of modernity as expressed in the contemporary West), he adopts its definitions of rationality and legitimacy and then deconstructs his texts in the modern Muslim world to highlight the convergences towards that imminent universality. He takes for his referents the range of theoretical thinking in development and transformationist politics and reinforces them with a supplementary range of Western thought concerned specifically with the Islamic

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<sup>8</sup>First published in 1964 (New York: Wiley) and revised and expanded for a second edition in 1979 (Huntington, NY: Krieger). While nationalism then was the focus of the changing constellation of interest and power, culture, and ideology, the relationship with Islam and the problems of community and legitimacy was the *leitmotif*. Tropes and strategies that would be carried to new heights in *Islamic Liberalism* already appear there: for example, his reflection that the ambivalence of Western democratic thought itself was at the root of the ambivalence with which representative institutions in the Middle East were regarded by Westerners, an attitude which paves the way for the sleight of hand that would henceforth embed the critique and the understanding of the region's mind and history against a critical self-understanding of the West. Other landmarks in his earlier work pointing in a similar direction may be located in a short but perceptive article published shortly after he had submitted his doctoral dissertation at Harvard. This is his "A Prolegomena to the Study of the Comparative Politics of the Middle East," *The American Political Science Review*, 1, no. 3 (September 1957). Another opportunity for telescopic reflections came when he was selected to preside over the first kaleidoscopic survey of the state of the art in Middle Eastern studies which was commissioned by the Middle East Studies Association in the early seventies. Leonard Binder, ed., *The Study of the Middle East: Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and the Social Sciences* (New York: Wiley, 1976).

world's dynamics and culture. In this way, he attempts a synthesis of development theories and orientalism, the social sciences and the humanities.<sup>9</sup>

Against this matrix, the narratives unfold around thematic clusters: "Liberalism and the Rejected Alternative," "A Non-Scripturalist Fundamentalism," "Islam and Capitalism," "Liberalism, Nationalism and the Heritage," and "The Hermeneutics of Authenticity." He locates a pole for each cluster. These are, in order, Ali Abdel Razik, Syed Qutb, Samir Amin, Tariq al Bishri, and finally a twin pole in Zaki Naguib Mahmoud and Abdallah Laroui. Having introduced the main course, he then weaves the related and relevant side lights through it. In the meantime, the texture's density is maintained through a (tantalizing) sequence of overlaps and breaks (*coupures*). The range of privileged thinkers is also calibrated, and texts singled out for examination are those most likely to lend themselves to the instruments of inquiry. This explains the text's morphology and development. Not only does it tell us why it should begin with Abdel Razik and end with Mahmoud and Laroui, but it also divulges something of the texture and the range of Binder's type of Islamic liberalism.

A close-up on some of the techniques may illumine the author's deconstruction strategies. Where there is doubt about a text's affinity (to his particular thesis), and yet where propriety, prudence, or a minimal deference to the substance of the matter call for its inclusion, Binder has two options: treat it extrinsically and cover the spaces, or reappropriate its meaning to suit his purpose. I will dwell briefly on these negotiating skills not simply because of their intrinsic interest, but because they allow us to see the real person behind the professional and the vision. Such an exercise also provides a unique access to the possibilities and pitfalls inherent in an ideological reading of a text, in the manipulation of ideas, and in the political play with knowledge in addition to inadvertently leading us to identify an emerging (reemerging) genre of literature—new patterns in an old craft.

While Binder is not superfluous or perfunctory in tackling his material, he occasionally intentionally (unwittingly?) observes a perfunctory and superfluous treatment of his subject. This happens with many of the secondary texts he interjects around his cluster-poles. When he does so, his discursive overview tends to be external and descriptive, skirting all serious probing into rationale and grounds, an approach which suggests that the grounds for

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<sup>9</sup>This approach may be detected with varying emphases in the work of such political scientists and sociologists writing on the region, notably Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) and Gabriel Ben-Dor, *State and Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1983); S. N. Eisenstadt's comparative civilizational perspective is also relevant to this approach. See his *Revolution and the Transformation of Societies: A Comparative Study of Civilizations* (New York: Free Press, 1978).

alternative reasoning were nonexistent, nonworthy, or at least stemmed from a zone that fell outside the boundaries of reason and value—an unacknowledged space. As if to fill in the void, he explains the thought away as if it were an essentially interested stance prompted by pragmatism or vested interests. Significantly, this covering technique is reserved for derailing the lapses into anything “unduly Islamic” which may be taken to conform to the traditional Sunni(!) consensus on what the faith and the community were about. It is curiously absent where it might be more effectively applied to explaining radical departures from the consensus.

Sometimes such contexts are an open secret which soon yield their significance. Take, for example, the political vendetta in Egypt during the 1920s between the monarch and the Constitutional Liberals in which Ali Abdel Razik was personally interested (class interests?!). It was against this setting that his radical, consensus-shattering discoveries about the truth of the relationship (or lack of it) between religion and governance in Islam were made. While Binder explores its rationale and the reactions it triggered at length, and while he ventures an opinion as to what prompted such reactions, beyond any inherent rationality nothing is explicitly said about the original discovery’s history and sociology. We learn indirectly about the historical context of the Ottoman caliphate’s abolition and the resulting disorientation in the Muslim world and, in another afterthought, something about why Abdel Razik may have departed from an ‘Abduh’s rationalist legacy. But the ideology and pragmatics of a stance, the personal stakes in a power-political context, is surprisingly glossed over in the midst of an encumbrance of detail. More significant, however, than Abdel Razik’s rationale, which after all was not intended to provide an Islamic grounding for democracy as Binder points out, was the lesson it left behind, which was not immediately lost on Binder either: it showed the limits beyond which no debate on an *Islamic* liberalism could go (p. 149).

On the other hand, in exploring the context for radical departures, there may be those less accessible reaches that might call for some enlightenment for the benefit of the initiate, such as the more diffuse vested interests in resurrecting pre-Islamic ethnicities and identities in Berber North Africa which presently spark some of Arkoun’s most peevisly critical sensibilities. While we merely take note of such ideological interests, which Binder completely glosses over, we shall turn briefly to Arkoun to highlight other aspects of our subject.

Binder’s stakes and strategies as he negotiates his way round the precipice, at the interface of a *kulturkampf*, can be drawn from any point. A glimpse from the vantage point of Arkoun’s radical liberalism may be as enlightening as any other in apprehending the sense of opportunity which Binder sees for a culture’s mind and future. This opportunity presents itself in a reading,

an interpretation, a moment of truth that comes through the text with Arkoun (and is “teased” out of it with Qutb). Yet, while the text may be Arkoun, the subtext is definitely Binder and summarily it reads thus:

[The tyranny and stagnation that has stymied the history of a culture can be attributed to an oppressive logocentrism (read: scripturalism) perpetuated by a class and a polity; its alleviation is contingent on the recovery of the *sociale-imaginaire* and of a *memoire-tradition* whose absence can be identified with the silence that has historically been imposed upon a folk-culture and that has relegated its ways to the realm of the ‘unthinkable’. It was this *imaginaire* which was at the source of the creative process of “writing the revelation” (so narrates the mediator), and its recovery is the only hope for regenerating a discipline (“Islamologie”) that can expediently sign itself out of a repressive tradition as it triumphantly inscribed the liberal ethic of modernity (and the democratic as opposed to the Islamic state) into the history and politics of a liberated and rediscovered folk.] [End!]

It is not hard to grasp the fascination of many in the current academy (in the West) with the originality of a mind like Arkoun’s and to vouch for its liberal credentials. But how much more does it tell us about Binder?

Binder’s own social democratic sensibilities lie closer to a dialectical grounding of modernity. Thus he is more inclined to favor the Larouis over the Arkouns in the cultural transition. And yet, he is aware of the power and the originality of a nonscripturalist argument from outside the tradition. Thence he admits to the greater epistemological cogency of an essentially humanist Arkoun and to the potentials of structuralism, together with the other modernist departures inherited from the Western legacy, in precipitating a tradition’s mutations. In short, in the calibration of texts and authors, while Laroui is favored over Arkoun, Arkoun scores higher than either Abdel Razik or Mahmoud mainly because of a lingering scripturalism in the one and an unwillingness or inability to make the epistemic breach in the other. This dilutes their liberalism and leaves them wallowing in ambivalence and easy prey to circumstance. He observes, however, a broken silence when it comes to the pragmatics and ideology of their discourse—dimensions/weapons which he reserves for deconstructing the vagaries of nationalism and of an Islamically diluted liberalism, notably in pursuing the inductive and instrumental reasoning of Tariq al Bishri (chapter 7).

While Binder is aware of the sociopolitical interest contexts animating the alienated liberal impulses in a tradition, his conventional skepticism is attenuated when the trends detected in the departures from tradition are deemed

compatible with the framework of analysis and foundational assumptions of his rationale. Thus these departures need no such rationalization, since they reinforce his thesis that the change leading to the grand historical convergence (with the West) is trickling underway and that even the Muslim world does not lie beyond the pale of history (which makes him more magnanimous than Francis Fukuyama<sup>10</sup>). This is quite unlike other cases, where it is necessary to account for the reversals in the secularizing camp that seem to have occurred with dismaying frequency over the past decade. It is only rational to do so, cautions Binder, if only to preempt obscurantist speculations. In this way, the defections and the de/reformationist turns in the thought of Khalid Muhammad Khalid and especially Tariq al Bishri (why not the turns with Adel Hussain or Muhammad 'Imara? and why this obsessive focus on Egypt in a work claiming to address the prospects of Islamic evolution throughout a region?) are ostensibly addressed in the political context of an age, in much the same way as the denunciation of Abdel Razik's innovations by the ulama (backed by a broad spectrum of the public) had called for some ideological justification at the tribunal of Western rationalism. These, one might conclude, are the tropes for deflating the force of an argument, frequently before it has even been made.

But there are also those "moments of enthusiasm" when the dissonant text is taken on and its unfathomed depths are extrapolated upon, as when the text is deemed central enough to the main thesis of the book and calls for dissecting. There, the creative impulse is devoted to decontextualizing and reconstructing the text to expose its potentials. This is aided by further embedding it in an external supplementary matrix, thereby straining the instruments of interpretation and the text to be interpreted. This is what awaits the reader as Syed Qutb's thought is filtered through a Heideggerian/Gadamarian (and even a Nietzschean) lens to unearth imminent departures from the tradition.

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<sup>10</sup>Francis Fukuyama is deputy director of the State Department's policy planning staff and a former analyst at the RAND Corporation. In "A Reply to My Critics," which appeared in *The National Interest* (Winter 1989/90), he maintains an ambiguous attitude about the liberal prospects of Islam and the Muslim world. Throughout the debate inspired by his resurrection of the essentially Hegelian theses on "the end of history," Islam is mistakenly identified with a fundamentalist current in global history that is dismissed by him as not only a marginal and nonconsequential rival to liberalism, but as practically justifying our ignoring the fate of that (wayward) segment of humanity. In a public session hosted by the American Political Science Association at its annual convention (held at the Washington Hilton on August 31, 1991), Fukuyama's response to a specific question of the subject revealed that his ambivalence and disinterest was more a result of his own shallow acquaintance with the culture than simply a projection of his Eurocentric vision. He sees Islam through the eyes of the Young Turks and Naipaul. For the original theses and a view on the kind of debate that followed in intellectual and political circles, see *The National Interest* (Summer and Fall, 1989).

At this point, one notes a refreshing sense of consistency in a stratagem and device of probing into the psychodynamics of ideological/cultural change.<sup>11</sup> The minor difference occurs here at the surface structure level, while the choice of intellectual referents is sustained within the same matrix. The inquiry shifts away from the Freudian semantics in an earlier context to give precedence in the new text to an emphasis on the aesthetics and hermeneutics of an inquiry. On another plane, one notes that apart from some variations in orientation and methods, we are before another version of Western scholarship on Islam which might be more empathetic to its field, but one which nonetheless inclines to a neo-orientalism. In this round, the profession is reconstructed with staying affinities in the departments of the social sciences and the humanities. This is a dimension of the synthesis Binder attempts in his paradigmatic essor in the field.

This brings to mind some recent scholarship which shares Binder's fundamental orientations, suppositions, and techniques. While the thrust of such scholarship is to rationalize certain trends and developments in contemporary Muslim society and frequently to deploy this rationalization to reinforce the status quo in the regional politics of the day, it does so by attempting to reappropriate Islamic history and the Muslim community's key symbols and categories in terms of Western experience and rationality. It is interesting that there is a tendency for such an inquiry to arise in the course of rethinking aspects of the Western tradition (not unlike Binder's critique of development theories and the deconstruction of orientalism). In the process, it seeks to position Islamic realities and to capture Islamic futures within that prism. Two recent works may be taken to illustrate this technique, one by Ellis Goldberg and the other by Tamara Sonn.

Goldberg works on the commendable pretext of advancing comparative studies which transcend cultural continents and time zones.<sup>12</sup> In an original thesis, he exposes the consistencies and recurrences in the fundamentalist encounter with modernity as the discourse and strategies of militant Muslim groups in Egypt are reconstructed against the experience of the Puritan reformationists in sixteenth-century Europe. The implication here is to confirm the essentially modernist dimension of an orientation to community and

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<sup>11</sup>*The Ideological Revolution*, op. cit., chapter 6. Also, see Leonard Binder et al., *Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 40 ff.

<sup>12</sup>"Smashing Idols and the State: The Protestant Ethic and Egyptian Sunni Radicalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, no. 1 (January 1991): 3-35. Goldberg's theoretical focus in this article is on rethinking the Weberian thesis on the Protestant ethic to highlight Puritanism's historical role as a catalyst to state building and "to bring the state rather than the capitalist market into the explanatory picture." In the process, he makes an interesting case for the potential effects of transforming a classical religious tradition in its attitudes to authority and community in a way that highlights some of the premises in Binder's more subjective deconstruction of Sayyid Qutb's thought.



authority and to suggest the congruences with the rise of the modern nation-state in the contemporary Muslim world as with its European antecedents. This tendency to draw on analogies and to relocate the evolutionary trends in a progressive train of universal history is more explicitly articulated in another sociocultural foray into the challenges of political legitimacy in an Arab world seemingly caught between two equally demanding and conflicting loyalties, the Qur'an and the crown.<sup>13</sup>

Sonn, using a prudent combination of the subtle and the strident, seeks to reconstruct the relationship between religion and politics in Islamic thought and history in a way that vindicates the universality of the European process of secular nation-state building. She sees an intrinsic compatibility between European secularization and its imminent counterpart processes in the modern Muslim world; i.e., the seeds for the contemporary actualization of a secular ideal are inherent in Islamic classical thought (of all places with Ibn Taymiyah). She argues that it was modern history's vagaries and Europe's negative impact on the region—constituting the “European betrayal” (pp. 158-9)—which impeded the momentum of a presumably universal trend to draw the boundaries between Church and polity and to affirm a principled territorial integrity among the emerging Muslim peoples.

Like the discoveries resulting from some moments in Binder's deconstruction of the modern Muslim mind, the reader is in for some surprises in this reappropriation of Islamic history in terms of its liberal prospects. Not only are Muslims enlightened as to the “real” meaning of secularization in European history, a meaning which has eluded even the most modernist among them, like the late Fazlur Rahman (p. 1-2, 28), but they wake up to the news that today they have reached the threshold at which medieval Europe found itself on the eve of the break up of the Holy Roman Empire (pp. 29-30). This is reason enough, the sympathetic author implicitly contends, for the modern West to be more patient with developments in the Muslim world, provided that Muslims begin to apprehend the reality of the transformations taking place in their midst (including the attenuation of Islamic militancy and the emergence of “moderate fundamentalists” qualified by their readiness to accept national identities and to work within them for Islamic goals). It seems that the new orientalism of an avowedly more open and liberal

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<sup>13</sup>Tamara Sonn, *Between Qur'an and Crown: The Challenge of Political Legitimacy in the Arab World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); cf. Fahmy Huwaidi, *Al Qur'an wa al Sultān* (Cairo: Dār al Shurūq, 1984). Sonn's work draws uncritically on the tendentious interpretations of Bandali Jawzi, a Palestinian of Russian stock who lived in Alexandria and who produced one of the earliest materialist interpretations of Islamic history in Arabic. Her own reading of Islamic history is highly tendentious as she clearly reads it backward, projecting modern attitudes on the past. In her eagerness to find the seeds of national entities and consciousness, she introduces anachronisms like “the Egyptian government” under Ṣalāḥ al Dīn to refer to the Ayyubid dynasty (p. 51).

academy inadvertently falls back on old patterns and stratagems. The impetus to revisit and revise European history in the contemporary stock-taking with modernity provides the neo-orientalist Islamologue with an opportunity to read the future of Islam against that retrospect. In the process, the distinctions between a "latent and a manifest Orientalism" are vindicated.<sup>14</sup>

The crux of a historicist reading of Islam's liberal prospects for Binder, as for Sonn and others, stems from the universalist rhetoric of a modernity masking the self-aggrandizing ambitions of the New Rome.<sup>15</sup> It also reflects a professional interest notable in certain American political science circles for the globalization of the discipline.<sup>16</sup> Political science students are generally aware that international politics and the modern nation-state's foreign policy have historically been among the more resistant arenas to rationalization and to the institution of "democratic control." In an era of growing uncertainties within the estate of modernity, it is not surprising that advocates of the Modernist Project continue to exude a concurrence and a confidence beyond all measure in speaking about "the Other," almost as if the cohesiveness of the fabric and texture of history in the contemporary West depended upon this affirmation through the Other, pending the consolidation of newer trends and forms within. This affirmative posture has its hawks and doves. There are those who wish to remake world history and the new world order through outright domination and subjugation more directly inspired by nineteenth-century Realpolitik and Orientalismus, who want to drop the Other by the wayside of history with little ceremony and even fewer qualms. But there are also those moderating influences who see themselves as among the more realistic of the idealists and who seek to serve both Caesar and God by

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<sup>14</sup>See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1979), 201 ff., and especially 206. Binder perceptively invokes this distinction in an engaging subtext referred to above. *Islamic Liberalism*, notes, 371.

<sup>15</sup>See Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) which, as Said might still agree, is behind much of the current "new world order" thinking. This work was first brought to my attention when reading *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981). First-hand consultation of Luttwak's text revealed a potentially rich source for understanding and reconceptualizing the (regional) politics of the Middle East in the world system along lines which go beyond the developmentalist lore on "the rentier state," or the "neo-patrimonial state," or the "bourgeois-state," to the idea of the "client state" in a penetrated polity—a notion briefly introduced in Abul-Fadl, *Islam and the Middle East: Aesthetics of a Political Inquiry* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991).

<sup>16</sup>The debate on the discipline's status between globalization and parochialization was a principal theme in the presentations at the convention of the International Political Science Association which met in Washington, D.C., in 1988. It is also frequently the subject of panel discussions and plenaries at the annual conferences of the American Political Science Association when these panels are conceived outside the more typical parochial and empirical interests of the organizers.

contending for world dominance while persuading the Other that this is in the best interest of all. The tenor of the Binderian discourse in *Islamic Liberalism* and the conceptual framework, the referents, and the *a priori*s within which he attempts to reconstruct the contours and the politics of a liberal ethic in (for?) the Middle East belongs to this latter, more benign variant of modernity.

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The trouble with this well-intentioned effort is that it proceeds against a background grossly insensitive to the region's contextual realities. So far, the critique's thrust has been to point to some of the underlying biases and assumptions that motivate and orient the work and to suggest that these are not confined to *Islamic Liberalism*, but that they structure a field. In locating elements of the deconstruction strategies and identifying affinities with other literature, I have sought to contextualize the work at hand in order to draw attention to one of its graver omissions: its own failure to place its reading of the Middle East as text and to explore its intellectual currents and trends in their proper cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, when the author attempts to supplement his critical deconstruction of these trends with an empirical overview of the prospects, these omissions are amplified. This reflects a more general failing in the field of Middle Eastern studies. Notwithstanding some advances over the past decade and the emergence of a more contextually sensitive brand of scholarship, the gap between the Western academy and Middle East realities persists and continues to be reinforced by various and sometimes unexpected quarters; for example, the ambivalent impact of a nucleus of adopted and co-opted scholarship from the region itself upon the level of broad consensus that exists within the academy.

The point here is that despite an apparent abundance of perspectives and a variety of emphases, there generally exists a threshold of consensus about what constitutes the imperatives and direction of the region's evolutionary potentials and that this consensus is conceived and projected against the background of prevailing cultural, professional, and ideological constraints which affect the outcome and generally serve to feed the gap between the academy's view and reality. The standard retort, when it comes to excusing some policy mishaps, is that it is usually not for want of information but due to limitations in interpretation and abortive judgments. Sometimes, however, the various constraints may not operate in tandem, and it is then possible, through investing in what might be called the potential of differential, for elements of the reality to percolate to the academy. It is during these occasional breakthroughs that the opportunity exists for a benevolent impact

from the academy, one affecting policy making in Western power centers in a manner that might reinforce the region's evolutionary prospects in a (liberal) direction.

Binder's work is of particular interest from this perspective, for it acts against its own best intentions. His critique of development ideologies is an internal critique, and his idea of an Islamic liberalism is especially tendentious, while his search for synthesizing a new paradigm proceeds against the implicit consensual matrix of the profession. Consequently, the differential spacing of existing constraints that might reflect positively in some other studies and that would consequently allow for relevant contextualities to emerge is reduced to a minimum, much to the disadvantage of *Islamic Liberalism's* credibility. Having said that, it is only fair to point to what we mean by the major empirical realities which seem to evade many investigations on Middle East before we can address some of the particular oversights in Binder's work, or the gaps and silences in a discourse.

No understanding of the contemporary Middle East is possible without taking into consideration the traumatic impact of the two major pace-setting events which have taken place in its recent history and which have left their enduring effects: the dissolution of the Ottoman caliphate and the loss of the last effective framework of an institutional and symbolic representation for Muslims in the historical heartland of Islam, and the emergence of the Zionist movement and the creation (implantation) of Israel in historic Palestine at the center of this region. The endemic cycle of crises and sequels that constitute the Middle East's modern politics can only be appreciated against the impact and configurations of this double confluence. These crises have been addressed under a variety of rubrics emphasizing, in turn, different dimensions like legitimacy, identity, leadership, governance, authority, development, etc. In the absence of a holistic perspective, they have been subsumed under fragmented, conflicting, and reductionist perspectives tending to converge around two axial orientations: political economy and state building. The background to both has been a political science characterized by being philosophically grounded in positivism, empirically lacking in historical perspective, and institutionally assuming the nation-state for its central unit of analysis.

In short, the major internal determinants which have historically given the region its direction (or lack of it) throughout this century, and that remain at the root of any prospective evolution, lie outside the dominant paradigm, whether in the discipline or in area studies, and this reflects on the discontinuities and imbalances in the study of the region.

With this background in mind, it is not hard to understand how some of the basic realities can be overlooked, dismissed, or ignored, or how, when they are addressed, they usually appear in a disjointed, fragmented, and

dispersed form, a partial treatment of a parochiality that can easily end up in obfuscation and ambiguity if not simply in distortion. In Binder's account, whether in its deconstruction and analytical excursus or in its prognostics and empirical overviews, the reality of a practical context with its historical, social, cultural, and power political dimensions is missing at both the macrolevel, in the implicit parameters of the study, and at the microlevel, in its explicit constituents and in its direct references to specific convergences. This is what we refer to as the gaps or the glaring omissions in the text, and what we refer back to as the various constraints on the reading.

Among the specific contextual realities of practical relevance to themes addressed in *Islamic Liberalism* are those that might be ascribed to the externals that directly impinge on the "domestic" affairs of the region's states. It is more appropriate perhaps to speak of the "penetrated system" rather than try to maintain an artificial boundary between one realm and another. Within such a system, few policies can be passed that are perceived to disadvantage the Great Powers' regional vital interests, some of which may relate to consolidating the polity's infrastructure (state building), where a strengthened polity's loyalties will have to be assured if the favorable regional balance of power is to be maintained. Conversely, such "external" vital interests might include some very "internal" political issues, like the kind of law to be applied to assure justice to the governed—an area which presumably falls within the nation-state's sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> Even where the application of such law expresses the majority's explicit will, this is no assurance for its validity or its continuity.<sup>18</sup>

Speaking historically, one could invoke the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale of 1904 and conclude that today there seems to be an implicit consensus among the influential powers of the international (and regional) system that "justice" is best decided for, and not by, the Middle East. There is also the unconfirmed suspicion that given the Middle East's strategic value, "order"

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<sup>17</sup>A good point to locate attitudes on the score are the proceedings in Congress. See, for example, the hearings before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East and the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives of the 99th Congress at its first session discussing Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic radicalism. John Esposito's statement and the discussions relating to the US attitude and relationship with Islamist orientations are especially enlightening (pp. 84-90).

<sup>18</sup>Michael Hudson, "After the Gulf War: Prospects for Democratization in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal*, 45, no. 3 (Summer 1991) economically but unequivocally points to the imminent pressures to curb the growing influence of Islamists in countries where they have achieved some electoral gains. The principal weapon available to US foreign policy to pressure regimes into containing their Islamic constituencies or policies is economic assistance. But there are other means of strangling an uncompromising regime that draw on the arsenal of "low-intensity warfare" strategies explored in the literature of counterinsurgency and international conflict. For a radical and relevant perspective see Alexander George, ed., *Western State Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

takes precedence over “justice.” Therefore what counts is not so much the fate of the “bourgeois state” as Binder, Samir Amin, Laroui et al. might contend, but that of the “client state.”<sup>19</sup> Again, it is not so much the ruling coalition of current interests that matters, but the necessity to impose minority rule and to ensure the sustained appeasement of those constituencies whose interests must be conceded priority in shaping regional politics.

Binder may be right to point to the underdevelopment of indigenous Middle Eastern (Muslim) perspectives (p. 84) and to evoke the need to look elsewhere when it comes to understanding change.<sup>20</sup> But, he could have taken some of these realities into account when aiming at a paradigmatic vision using the elements and prospects for an Islamic liberalism for its axis. Other less theoretically ambitious and relatively unencumbered colleagues with a greater sensitivity to the region have done so. At present, there is little in the development theories as they are conceived and developed in the trans-Atlantic world, in both its Latino and Anglo-Saxon constituents, that can fully capture the opaque realities of the postcolonial Middle East. Nor does the natural history of development theories lead one to expect more promising initiatives (chapter 2). This is not simply due to certain unique actualities about the region's history, politics, and culture which are real enough. Nor is it due to the tendency by a Muslim scholar to lapse into “autarky,” to anticipate Binder's tropes. It is rather due to the fact that the political economy paradigm(s) and the dominant (anthropological) culturalist paradigms rarely extend to comprise those categories of historical experience and meaning central to apprehending legitimacy and power in the Arab-Islamic core. There thus remains the basic issues in the region's internal and external politics which need to be charted and addressed in any prognostics on the political evolution/trends there. And this will have to be done without the obfuscation that attends grand theory or little narratives. Where policy is contingent on information correctly interpreted, learning the facts with a minimum of thwarted perspectives could have a significant bearing on the Middle East's prospects for liberal evolution.

Included in this vision is the institution of rational and representative regimes in which the principles of human dignity and freedom are maintained, the foundations of a just and prosperous order secured, participatory politics

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<sup>19</sup>See note 15 above. The focus on conceptualizing the state in the Middle East in current literature is generally oblivious of the “external dimension” in sustaining its intrinsic characteristics. See Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People, and the State* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), chap. 6.

<sup>20</sup>Challenging the received canon, some Western scholars make the belated and obvious suggestion that the most appropriate place to look for innovative Arab writing on social change may be in historical and cultural journals and in creative forms of expression rather than in social science journals. *Statecraft in the Middle East*, op. cit., xvii.

encouraged and, above all, where the arbitrariness of power is effectively constrained. The dynamics ensuring such a vision must essentially be the same, both in an Islamic liberalism and elsewhere. Thus any attempt to interfere with this dynamic, even by a liberal patron, is bound to affect the possibilities of its materialization. Binder's version of an Islamic liberalism is offensive in two ways: it defines the vision and dictates its contents, and then it recommends some kind of (Western) support to ensure its survival in an (alien) territory pending its transformation. Keeping the lines of discourse open to enhance the influence of the peripheral agents of the approved brand of liberalization is one of the more civilized, and the less obnoxious, means. But there are other means as well.

One of the less innocuous messages implicit in *Islamic Liberalism* as text comes through a retrospective glance at the region from the adopted vantage point of Laroui's "future perfect," a semantic reification of a grammatical category signifying the idea that "the concept precedes its realization ... and that ideology must be given primacy over society" (p. 325). This is the validating myth of social change within a self-actualizing authenticity that can only be perfected in a fictitious future. Making that ideological leap can anticipate the reality and, in the process, justify the means to the end. Paraphrased, Binder's subtext reads thus: it is conceivably justifiable to intervene on the side of a coalition of indigenous power interests to promote the growth (security?) of the bourgeois state as the necessary condition for the triumph of liberalism. The "bourgeois state" might be a perfectly legitimate conceptual category in neo-Marxist analytics; in the actual context of Binder's discourse it is a euphemism for the current fragmented territorial entities, while the coalition of bourgeois interests (including patrons and clients) denotes the minority regimes in power. Discounting the jargon of the profession, it is hard to see exactly where the novelty in this prescription lies. If this is where the pursuit of liberalism leads, then surely the costs are high and the gains all too dubious. In trying to impose this kind of liberalism on the Middle East, we are admittedly before an attempt to square the circle.

Perhaps Binder should have looked beyond the matrix of an essentially ethnocentric reading in order to identify alternative rationales and possibilities. That he did not indicates a case of cognitive dissonance, meaning certain discontinuities in perception between the given and the possible, the immediate and the potential. That access was blocked to any other vantage point is further emphasized by the ideological and professional constraints that occluded the region's political and historical realities. How else can one explain some of the glaring omissions of a text that claims to profile ideas against their evolving contexts? In a text of nearly four hundred pages of dense print and ideas about the prospects of an Islamic variant of freedom and democracy, one learns virtually nothing about the most vital contingencies shaping outcomes:

the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian trauma, the permeability of a region and its foreign vulnerabilities, quite apart from the nature and reality of a repressive order of polity and the dynamics of its perpetuation. To take the deconstruction of ideas and the "text" for a pre/text in discounting the central catalysts and influences in a political culture's evolution is to cast doubt upon the relevance and the reliability, if not the intentions, of an entire profession and its adepts. If the problem lies more in the horizons of a pursuit than in its strategies, then it might still be possible to advance alternative vistas that would stand the inquiry into Islamic liberalism on its feet and could also reflect on the profession's status and integrity.

"There is no reason why these (Islamic) polities should not be judged by Islamic criteria rather than by the allegedly universal criteria of a non-Muslim world," observed Ralph Braibanti, formerly of Duke University, at a conference sponsored by the Middle East Center, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, in March 1986.<sup>21</sup> While the universalizing framework within which Binder is writing is fully appreciated from an Islamicizing perspective, yet whether one argues out of truth or prudence, it is only consistent and in keeping with realities to apply Braibanti's principle of consistency to understanding a culture's mind. Instead of defining Islamic liberalism in terms of a presumably universal (Western) category and thus perpetuating a violence of discourse inherent to all orientalism, as Binder would himself concede, we turn if only briefly to an alternative plane of discourse on the sources and prospects of an Islamic liberalism in the contemporary Middle East. This is not a recourse to some form of cultural autarky as some might suspect, but rather a logical introspection into the grounds of a stance from which it should become possible to relocate the parameters of universality against a framework of "authenticities." Our attempt might equally be relegated to a positivist predilection as opposed to the dialecticism that might promote the dynamics of the cultural encounter with the Other. But then again there can be no such encounter without assuring the grounds and the referents, as Binder himself well knows. The only possibility to avoid a violence of discourse is to concede to the Other what one concedes to oneself, and to proceed from thence to identify the parameters of converging interests and common grounds. The universal can only exist in relation to the particular, the absolute to the relative, and without conceding reciprocities there can be no parity in the cultural encounter. There might be scope for a Hegelian dialectic of transcendences elsewhere, but not here in the specific context of ascertaining the grounds and the prospects of an "Islamic liberalism" in Binder's terms of discourse.

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<sup>21</sup>"A Rational Context for Analysis of Arabic Polities," *American-Arab Affairs*, no. 12 (Summer 1987): 108-22.



## 3

Muslims have a long tradition of debate and inquiry when it comes to the rational pursuit of a given subject's truth. This is based on the traditional interpretation of the Prophet's hadith on the rewards for properly-conducted *ijtihād*: twofold when it hits the mark, and one for the effort when it misses. Since the Prophet's *ijtihād* guided the community's and its members' daily life and was enjoined in the context of communal governance, I shall assume that *ijtihād*-related issues are connected to power-related issues. Thus, politically relevant lessons can be inferred from the discourse on *ijtihād*. In this way, I shall go beyond the confines of the legalistic paradigm of the later traditionalist Islamic discourse which is reinforced by modern orientalism. It should also be noted that even where the *ijtihād* discourse was reduced to the parameters of jurisprudence, the latter's scope has to do with the adjudication of human transactions, which includes the public realm.

Regardless of the emphasis, the political dimension reasserts its relevance to an *ijtihād*-related discourse whether we think in terms of the Western constitutionalist, liberal, or neoliberal paradigms taking rule making for their focus, or decision making and the authoritative allocation of the political system's values, or the rhetoric of public choice and public policy. Any decontextualization and reconstruction in Islamic political theory would have to stop at certain signposts (i.e., insights gleaned by applying *ijtihād* to the discourse) in the tradition.

A synoptic view of the possibilities available to the *mujtahid* for assessing a ruling's validity and worth (or truth) is therefore of some consequence in gauging a culture's constitutional (as opposed to its absolutist) temper. It was admittedly that goal of arriving at a sound opinion or the correct ruling that originally stimulated the early *uṣūliyyūn*'s (jurisprudents') and theologians' search as to whether truth was one or multiple.<sup>22</sup> By extension, targeting the most efficacious (political) ruling/judgment (ditto: opinion or policy) in a matter of public interest became the legitimate object of disputation. As a debate is by definition a forum of critical deliberation and ongoing discourse, opinion varied among those who identified multiplicity or plurality and those who saw the truth of a disputed matter as one. There were two principal schools of thought on the matter: those who saw every *ijtihād* as potentially correct (the *muṣawwibah*) and those who questioned every effort, restricting the correct stance to only one (the *mukhaṭṭi'ah*).

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<sup>22</sup>It should be observed that there are obvious differences between *uṣūlī* and *kalāmī* discourses as to their scope, subject, points of departure and orientations, or their general epistememes. But these are deliberately overlooked here as they do not directly impinge on the point we are making.

Apart from a vigorous tradition of thought and discourse (that might otherwise casually be dismissed under the rubric of “medieval scholastic disputations”), two essential points could be of interest to the political theorist following this debate: one relates to its rationale or logic and the other to its outcome. In the first instance, it was noteworthy how the party that argued for plurality grounded itself in the principles of consistency and sufficiency: as long as the *mujtahid* or the arbitrator pursued a sound methodology, it was argued, his ruling or opinion must also hit something of the mark. There was nothing arbitrary about the means or the procedure that validated the outcome, and the end in view was not a metaphysical abstraction of something out in the Beyond, inalienable, indivisible, and whole. The plane of the discursive transaction could be identified with the temporal: It was *doxa* (opinion) in the *ijtihād* of those qualified to pursue the public interest (*maṣlahah*), and it was not to be conflated with the Absolute (i.e., the realm of the Transcendent, *al ḥaqq*, pertaining to the doctrine, *tawḥīd*, and, as such, to Truth).

The other point pertains to the stance of those who opted for the oneness of the truth, a stance intrinsically even more astounding for its “liberal” overtones. This school (*mukhtaṭṭi’ah*) argued that the truth was one and that therefore there could be only one valid *ijtihād*-derived ruling. Yet this view did not rule out the practical validity of other rulings. It was the perception of this truth that accounts for this tolerance, for if this one truth were by nature diffuse and pervasive, it would be impossible to identify or single out any one effort or ruling to the exclusion of others. There was, in short, an element of inclusiveness in these deliberations, a wariness of monopolistic claims on what constituted the truth on a matter of worldly interest, and room for the temporally relative, diversity, and other possibilities which in effect left the door ajar even for the tradition’s skeptics.

It was this ethos, based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah, which determined correct communal and individual behavior as well as the limits of authority and obligation. An example of this is given by Abū Ḥanīfah who, when asked for a ruling, would state that to the best of his knowledge he had arrived at the right decision but that his opinion was not the last word on the subject. By the same token, an apparently unsound judgment could turn out to have been the right one. The truth of an opinion contingent on the expert’s rational pursuit was not only relative but also variable, nonarbitrary, and respectful of measure and method. Beyond the cognitive valuation of opinion between the true and the false, the understanding and the temper of the tradition’s founding masters recognized differences in procedures and outcomes when dealing with mundane matters of communal interest. This constitutes one source of Islam’s liberal ethos. Why this ethos was not generalized to affect the polity’s praxis is the challenge confronting modern intellectuals working

within the tradition. A further challenge is how to reintegrate it so as to heal the wounds of a mixed history and regenerate the modern Muslim community.

Abstracting from a complex issue, it may be suggested that the gist of an Islamic liberalism upholds a freedom of choice and expression without repudiating authority, and that it upholds the authoritative without sanctioning the authoritarian. The range of human action and deliberation in conducting affairs of "public state" is not viewed as antagonistic to their divinely-revealed governing principles. In acknowledging the locus of the Absolute in Creation and History beyond any specific act and event, the domain of human relations and transactions is embedded in an orbit of the relative and the possible which precludes any claims to the absolute and the determinate. Contrary to what rational liberals like Binder might assume, the fate of Islamic liberalism depends on working out the consequences of the mis/appropriation of the meaning of authority and freedom in the modern world within this framework of knowledge and understanding. With an alternative relational ethics and its referents duly established, the task would be to empirically translate this meaning and to project its implications into the emerging polity.

Therefore the fate of Islamic liberalism does not lie in resolving the supposed tensions between the man-made and the divine any more than in an assumed shift in the locus of authority from God to man. The universalization of this problematique outside its breeding ground in the Eurocentric mind and its projections on the plane of European history might be humored as the conceit of folly, but its perpetuation must be deprecated as a violence of discourse (Edward Said) made all the more intense by the many silences it endorses (Derrida). As any student of Muslim history might know, political despotism in the Muslim world had its sources in factors other than the proclamation of monarchical divine right or institutional infallibility. Yet in his groping for the seedlings of an Islamic liberalism, Binder reserves his finest probings into the mediated ideas of those Muslim thinkers who move within the orbit of the European worldview. As will be duly noted, this is only partially justified by the terms of discourse and the framework of an East/West dialogue which he postulates at the outset and which only adds to the occlusion of the realities. Almost fortuitously then, he joins his alter egos in the Muslim world in endorsing the search for a fictitious liberation of the Muslim mind from the imperiousness of the text as the only highway to modernity and to a rational liberal polity.

By clinging to the stage's fringes and pinning his hopes on the peregrinations of an outgoing generation or of misplaced prodigies, he misses the epicenter and the gravitational nexus where the makings of a potentially genuine liberal history is underway. He ignores (or is unaware?) that the development of a critical emancipatory discourse in contemporary Islamic and Islamicizing circles is also sought in liberating the text as much as in

liberating the Muslim mind. But this is sought in ways not comprised in the alienated discourse of liberation and transcendence etched in an epistemic dichotomy (Z. N. Mahmoud), a hypothetical dialectics (Laroui), or a fictitious hermeneutic (Arkoun). The latter variations constitute at best the epiphenomenal moments in a transient and afflicted consciousness on its homeward journey from dispersal and estrangement. Rather, the more enduring and original efforts at breaking through misappropriated traditions and authorities, from within and from without, take place within the span of a protracted moment bridging the founding of the ummah to its destiny, its past to its future. These efforts' authenticity is unmistakable, as they are anchored in a *tawhīdī* episteme and, as such, proceed from within the tradition, not to refute it but to affirm it at a higher level of validity once it has been purged of its debilitating accretions. Authenticity here, contrary to its culturalist interpretations, precludes closure or exclusion, for the Islamic tradition is universal by its very nature. Its universality is, however, contingent on an open encounter (not an imposition) with the Other. This makes a convergence towards the principium of a liberal rational polity from different avenues (and rationales) accessing the highway of modernity possible.

In the Muslim world, the trek from the Shari'ah's "disembodied particularities" (p. 149) to the embodied Shari'ah polity conceived in the liberal ethos is encountered in the many efforts launched over the past decade and steadily gaining momentum. Their range spans the contributions of "veterans" (Muhamad al Ghazali) and "returning pilgrims" (Bishri, Adel Hussain, Muhamad Imara) as well as the many nascent intellects in a self-recovering ummah.<sup>23</sup> This perspective cannot be dismissed on the transparent pretext that it was hard to follow these political and intellectual debates "from the

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<sup>23</sup>A representative sample of the new intellectuals may be seen in increasingly sophisticated forums of opinion developed over the past decade and culminating in an outcrop of periodicals like *Minbar al Hiwār* (Beirut, 1986–/ 1406–), *al Ijtihād* (Beirut, 1988–), *al Insān* (Paris, 1990–/ 1411–), *Études Orientales* (Paris, 1988–). Some go back to the seventies, like *al Muslim al Mu'āshir* (Cairo and Beirut, 1976–) which has recently been reorganized and upgraded, while others are only just being launched into the nineties, like *Qirā'āt Siyāsīyah* of the World and Islamic Studies Enterprise (Tampa, FL) and *Mustaqbal al 'Alam al Islāmī* (Malta, 1991–). Capable and original intellectuals and researchers addressing contemporary Middle Eastern politics and social change from various Islamically-sensitive/relevant perspectives span a generation and include figures like Fahmy Huwaidi, Munir Shafiq, Wahij Kausarani, Radwan al Sayed, Abul-Qassim Haj Hamad, the late Fadel Rassoul, Bahisr Nafe, Khalil al Shaqaqi, Burhan Ghalioun, and many others only few of whom are known in a Western/Westernized academe like Tariq al Bishri, Adel Hussain, Muhammad 'Imarah, and Ahmad Sidqi Dajjani for their obvious contribution to the secularizing debate in the region. For a recent overview surveying the emerging radical critique of modernization in the Arab world from a perspective relevant to the shaping Muslim/Islamicizing consciousness, see Fadel Islami, *Contemporary Arabic Discourse: A Critical Reading of the Concepts of Renaissance, Progress, and Modernity 1978-1987* (Arabic) (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991).

outside" (they were neither esoteric or closed), nor can it end with the casual (contemptuous?) lip-service acknowledgement that a rethinking was in progress among Islamicists (p. 173), for it would be a mistake to identify Islamic rethinking with any self-proclaimed group(s). It would be an even greater mistake to confine such thought to any institutional affinity or to attempt to level it through arbitrary categories and misleading classifications.

Such thought and rethinking is an ongoing process among a generation of Muslims stunned into a modern consciousness. They are more united in their goals than in their forums and formal institutions, and their attempt to come to terms with history and reality in terms of a recovered Islamic sensibility proceeds individually and collectively. Some of their output might not be as accessible to an outsider because it takes place "internally," among an in-group; a growing portion of it becomes accessible through publication. However, the important thing for an "outsider" to remember is that this discourse is not for his benefit as has been the tendency in the Muslim world's modernizing discourse (in all its strands) since the debate between al Afghānī and Renan (1887?) and with Muḥammad 'Abduh's ambivalent excursions in reinterpreting the *ṣalafī* heritage and the modern relationship with the West.<sup>24</sup> Muslims are now debating with and among themselves, taking their own thought and traditions far more seriously than at any time since their modern encounter with the West. They are increasingly aware that how they understand themselves and how they define or redefine their relations with each other and with the world through that tradition can affect their reality in the praxis: the stakes are far closer to home.

The other aspect of the present discourse is its language and rationale, comprising its structure, categories, and concepts which are steadily being re-(dis)covered, articulated, reformulated, and integrated in terms intrinsic to the tradition, but distinctly "modern" (in the sense of relevant to actualities). It is perhaps in this sense that the author's reference to the inaccessibility of the Islamicizing discourse might be honored in the intention.

Binder assumes modernity's irreversibility and universality and the imminent transformation of a culture's mind and realities. If this is to be accepted at face value, it must be qualified by the realization that modernity

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<sup>24</sup>As in *Risālat al Tawḥīd*, a major *kalāmī* tract providing the foundations of the reformist curriculum and debate in the Muslim university throughout the Arab world and anticipating or resonating with currents in the Indian subcontinent. Another significant tract and progenitor of a type of literature discussing the compatibility between Islam and modernity was *al Islām wa al Madaniyah*. See *al 'Amāl al Kāmilah li Muḥammad 'Abduh* (a compendium of 'Abduh's works) in a series edited by Muhammad 'Imarah in the sixties and published in Cairo and Beirut in many editions. The classical (Western) scholarship on 'Abduh and modernist Islamic thought may be consulted in Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) and Malcolm Kerr *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Abduh and Rashid Rida* (University of California Press, 1966).

takes place in a context of referents that are not all transient. The rethinking behind an emergent liberal ethos essentially takes place against referents that feed on a tradition of sociocultural and psychohistorical experience different from that nurturing the Western variants of a model. Its outcome is contingent on a range of contemporary historical factors. In this sense, an evolution's presumed irreversibility is not fixed in a teleology or a determinism.

The current rethinking going on in the Muslim world is a historical reality and, to some extent, the influence of Westernizing currents such as those identified by Binder as a stimulant and a catalyst in reshaping a modern Islamic authenticity. It has fulfilled a double role in this process: that of mediating the dominant culture's elements so that they could be processed against the enduring "generics" of the host culture, and that of providing the ephemeral coterie in a stratum of assimilation and integration in the momentum of a potentially globalizing culture. The cycle of maturation in the latter will only be completed with the processing and reconstitution of the recovered authenticity of a Muslim culture that can then contribute to the efficacy and effectiveness of the globalizing potential.

In attempting to identify the makings of the liberal ethos in the modern Muslim mind, Binder has stopped at that periphery and mediating zone. His conception of the possibility of a convergence towards a modern rationality and a legitimacy that would bridge the gap between a historical East and West may be correct in principle. For one thing, the conventional distinction between two worlds would seem to be open to a critical reexamination in view of the dynamics of the modern age. Binder's conception and construction of a convergence is essentially flawed, however, because of its inherent ethnocentricity.

Nor could Binder forego his own deepest biases. An entrenched elitism is given full reign when dealing with the prospects for (his version of) Islamic liberalism's triumph. Instead of correctly identifying the real sources of danger threatening the region's liberal experience, he points in dismayed resignation and contempt at the "massive, glacial, and pitiable presence" of the lowest classes, the *sans culottes*, that weighs so heavily on Middle Eastern society (p. 359). This sounds more like a page out of the French Revolution or out of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in its vivid analysis of the bourgeoisie's ambivalence towards the peasants, the references to "the stupidity of the masses" as a "vile multitude" feeding on their "peasant religion," and the conditions that give rise to their superstition as against the enlightenment of the bourgeoisie.<sup>25</sup> Barring a social democratic bourgeois

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<sup>25</sup>These expressions are from Daniel de Leon's translation in an edition published by the *New York Labor News*, New York, in 1951, pp. 155-9. Its edited format was designed to popularize a tract that has influenced many Third World intellectuals and inspired much parallel analysis of Third World politics by their liberal mentors. It is celebrated by socialists

temper perhaps, this is a semantics/rhetoric with far less resonance for the contemporary realities of the Muslim Middle East. Evidently, these ignorant masses are identified in the subtext of *Islamic Liberalism* with the appeal of fundamentalism and we are back to square one again, reading out of an overworked paradigm, this time not of tradition and modernity but of Islam and the West. It is ironic that for all his explicit rejection of orientalist lore, Binder remains enthralled and ends up defeating his own best intentions.

As noted at the outset of his work, Binder was inspired by several purposes, one of which was to lay more adequate foundations for explaining the area's politics. An operating premise of the new paradigm was to locate the elements of historical change in a Hegelian confluence between the region's sociohistorical evolution and the consolidation of liberal ideas deemed to coincide with a core of emergent practical interests there. Yet it is hardly surprising that like Weber, Marx, and Hegel, the logic of historical and sociological inquiry is again thwarted when applied to Muslim societies. Instead of seeing the destitute masses as a product of the modern totalitarian state (and its variants), and unable to see the negative activism identified with "fundamentalism" as itself another product of the era's repressive and unjust realities, Binder is inclined to identify the Islam of history and tradition with political destitution and political reaction.

Overlooked is Islam's (and its ulama's) role and potential in educating and uplifting the masses wherever it has taken root or seen a revival. While historically and doctrinally the Islam of the majority actually favored the community over elitist predilections, the community it privileged was to be learned and enlightened. Learning was a means and an end for fulfilling a plebian obligation, not for indulging a patrician inclination. Equally overlooked is Islam's role in mediating and moderating the absolutist tendencies of those ideals of power and authority taken over from the caesars of the past and their descendants—the "satraps." This is part of an integral legacy of an inherent egalitarianism and freedom to which Muslims are aspiring and which eludes the deconstructive acumen of an erudite intellect seemingly too absorbed in its liberal theories. It is only one dimension of the missing paradigm in understanding the region's politics, and another index to the ideological and professional/cultural constraints that hedge and bind.

If mysticism is negatively taken to convey escapism, then paradoxically there is a sordid streak of mysticism about a work that is thoroughly embedded

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as the first application by Marx of his materialist conception of history to understanding a specific event and, as Eric Haas notes in introducing that volume, it constitutes for (socialist/liberal?) political science what *Das Kapital* once constituted for economics. Binder's elitism is not exceptional to liberal scholarship. See James Peck, ed., *The Chomsky Reader: Noam Chomsky* (New York: Random House/Pantheon Books, 1987). Pages 83-5 are especially relevant here.

in a materialistic and positivist ethos of a liberal political economy. Binder's critique of a field and his search for a new paradigm in which to locate an Islamic liberalism embarks him (and his reader) on a series of flights from reality into theory, from ideals into ideology, from the critique of development theories into an eclectic syncretization of developmentalist and orientalist philosophies, and from a potentially liberal Islamic conception of the polity into a liberalist fiction devoid of anything Islamic.

This is not to belittle a work that is the consummation of a career and an epitome of its field. In the unfolding of its little narratives, the text deftly and subtly exposes more of the ideological interests at stake in the ongoing changes in the Middle East and tells something about the agents involved. The book's importance is that it is a useful and enlightening reference and a synthetic framework that allows the students of the region to appreciate the scope and orientations of a modern discipline and to understand the limitations of its perspectives. Its value remains in the vision and the orientation that inspired it: the oneness of our globality and fate, and the need to maintain open the channels for intracultural communication.

To Muslim scholars in particular, *Islamic Liberalism* constitutes a stimulus and a challenge to engage in reconstructing the framework of an East/West dialogue on the vital issues of our times along lines more conducive to the principles of cultural parity. Binder has taken the lead in pointing to possible directions and in selecting his points of emphasis. Rationality and power might be a good place to begin. The ethics of rationality and power, as opposed to its pragmatics, might be even better. The discourse on Islamic liberalism lies at this intersection. It is up to scholars drawing on the ethos of *tawhīd* to make the case for the indivisibility of the modern world's fate and prospects in a more realistic context and from within an alternative perspective. While such a perspective is grounded in an internal Islamic critique, it is open to learning and to interacting with the Other in a human heritage that is ultimately universal and against a historical setting that is intrinsically global. In opening up to the Other, one thinks of the relevance of the recent developments in Eastern Europe for understanding aspects of the liberal ethos which currently escape liberals in the West. These are aspects which could highlight significant dimensions of the search for liberalism in the Muslim world. This however is the subject of the sequel and concluding part of the present essay.