

Review Article

Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*

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The author, Issa Boullata, states that his intention is to study Arab intellectual and social phenomena and trends against the background of modernity: "Particularly insufficient in Western studies are publications on Arab intellectuals who are grappling with the idea of modernity" (p. ix). Furthermore, "this book, concerned with the present-day Arab culture and its crisis, will attempt to present a number of important themes that have engaged Arab intellectuals" (p. 9) who "exhibit a profound desire to grapple with the problem of modernity" (p. 2).

Boullata uses two essential terms in his study—modernity and modernization—without exploring their epistemological structure and meaning, historical formation (especially in the context of Europe), and social viability in the modern Arab world. He takes it for granted that the Arab world has been a part of the modernization process for many decades. Furthermore, he seems to make a distinction between two types of Arab intellectuals: progressive/modernizing (forces of modernity), and conservative/traditionalist (forces of tradition). He claims that the first type "voiced and articulated the frustration of the Arab masses against Arab regimes and the prevalent culture of Arab society. Their writings were characterized by deep social insight, self-analysis and a great measure of self-criticism" (p. 2). And, "the more progressive among Arab intellectuals have tried to analyze the relationship of contemporary Arabs and the West" (p. 8). Also, "the forces of modernity, using mostly external ideas and models for change, are oriented towards the future, which they see as opening new horizons for the Arabs. Opposing them the forces of tradition, using mostly internal ideas and models for change, are oriented towards the past, which they see as an ideal to be repeated because they perceive it as having the promise of certainty and surety of proven success" (p. 6). Finally, "The difference between the extremist Arab thinker on the Right and the extremist Arab thinker on the Left is that the former conforms to a past-oriented ideology which he believes originates in God and divine

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revelation, while the latter creates a new ideology which he believes originates in man and his societal needs, with emphasis on economic and social justice" (p. 151).

Consequently, one could conclude on the basis of the above that there is a deeply-entrenched intellectual polarization in the modern Arab world, and that the "traditionalist intelligentsia" is conservative, reactionary, anti-modern, anti-West, past-oriented, and deeply religious. The conservative intellectuals "have entered the fray by countering the process of change towards modernity and by supporting the preservation of tradition. Some of them belong to established religious institutions or newly mushrooming politico-religious groups, and many of them are professional graduates of secular universities who have been converted to traditionalism and religious conservatism because they perceived modernization as a process bent on destroying the fabric of Arab society and its age-old venerated values" (pp. 2-3). In short, the author comforts himself with the naive assumption that "conservative" Arab intellectuals have impeded the process of change because they equate change with modernity and modernity with Westernization.

Undoubtedly, a major issue at stake here is the relationship between Islam and society in the contemporary Arab world (Gilsenan 1982; Waardenburg 1978). Obviously, Islam cannot be reduced to politics or ideology or social movements alone; these could be only facets or manifestations of Islam in the modern world. In the same vein, the Islamic movements, as sociopolitical and religious movements, are only one facet of Islam, and their theological discourse and/or ideological contention is one among many other Islamic discourses. As such, Islamic movements, in spite of all the problems faced or caused by them, are authentically Islamic. That is to say, they are not a theoretical or a theological deviation from Islam. The major thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement in the modern Arab world, such as Ḥasan al Bannā, 'Abd al Qādir 'Awdah, Sayyid Quṭb, Muḥammad al Ghazālī, 'Alī Grayshah, Yūsuf al Qaraḏāwī, Sa'īd Hawwā, Ḥasan al Turābī, and Rāshid al Ghanūshī have discussed a wide range of issues in light of the original theological/Qur'anic formulations of Islam and in the context of Western colonialism and political divisions (the rise of the nation-state) arising in the postcolonial era. Such issues as the Islamic theory of knowledge; the theory of man in the Qur'an; *jāhiliyah* and Islam; social justice in Islam; the intelligentsia (religious and secular) and power; the West, capitalism and socialism; the formative phase of Islam and early Islamic philosophy and thought; and the possibility of an overall reconstruction of Islam in the modern world, have formed the intellectual core of Islamic social movements. These questions, no doubt, are very complex, and there is no indication that the intellectual leaders of the Islamic movements have discussed them in a monolithic, ahistorical, or superficial past-oriented fashion.

The claim Boullata makes (in the context of discussing Fu'ād Zakarīyah's theses on Islamic activism in the book's last chapter) that the Islamic movements are ahistorical is simply inaccurate in light of the complex theoretical and historical/political/social dynamics that modern Islamic movements have been subjected to (Snow and Marshall 1984; Khalafallah 1989). And, the solution that the Islamic movements have given to the predicament of modern Arab and Muslim societies is exactly the one given by Boullata on page 162: "The solution lies rather in a total and radical transformation of the system within the region and in a drastic redefinition of its relation to the world order outside it along lines suggested by some of the Arab thinkers discussed earlier in this book. The solution lies indeed in nothing less than a comprehensive restructuring of Arab life. This is the challenge that contemporary Arab thought should face up to, and this is the reality whose dynamics Arabs everywhere should understand in order to extricate the Arab world from it." The complete social, political, and ideological restructuring of the Arab world is, in a nutshell, the main objective of Islamic activism.

The intellectual history of the modern Arab world has been, naturally, preoccupied with a number of crucial issues since the dawn of the *nahḍah* in the early nineteenth century—namely, religion, the construction and uses of knowledge, democracy, nationalism, women's role in society, and social justice. Putting the various sociological interpretations of religion aside, religion, or—to be more precise the concept of "religious tradition"—is an inescapable problematic in the modern Arab discourse—be it Marxist, liberal, nationalist, feminist, or religious. In this context, Boullata discusses the Arab heritage in contemporary Arab discourse (chapter 2). Here he summarizes the main ideas of some major contemporary Arab intellectuals, such as Zakī N. Maḥmūd, Maḥmūd A. al 'Ālim, Maḥdī 'Āmil, Ḥusayn Murūwah, and others.

Though the thinkers discussed by Boullata exhibit different ideological/moral stances about political, social, and religious issues and questions, to a large extent they agree with the notion that the "Islamic tradition," far from being monolithic, is highly diversified and rich in content and method. As suggested earlier, one difficulty in reading Boullata's text is that he tries to present a highly "objective" summary of people's ideas without being explicit about his own. He therefore forces the reader to read between the lines, so to speak. Nevertheless, Boullata's general orientation seems to support the notion that he is for the rationalization and modernization of the Arab/Islamic tradition. Is the rationalization and/or modernization of the Islamic tradition possible? And, if it is, how would this come about?

Generally speaking, any discussion of the "Islamic tradition" has to account for the intangible and intellectual tradition of Islam, especially Qur'anic studies,

hadith tradition, *fiqh*, *ilm al uşūl*, Shari'ah, history, political and social theory, and philosophy. Since the dawn of the Renaissance and the widespread secularization of "religious sciences" in Europe, the "religious" and the "irrational" have been increasingly associated with each other. Edward Shils testifies to this fact by saying that "religious knowledge, the result of the study of the will and works of the divine power, of the revealed, sacred texts in which these are recorded, and of the body of interpretation which has grown up around these texts from the effort to understand them and the divine will better has been regarded as the very epitome of all that reason refuses. Prejudice, dogmatism, superstition, taboos against rational thought, and plain error have been regarded as the marks of religious belief" (Shils 1981, 94).

But, the authority of "tradition" is invoked when there is a major trauma in society. The continuous trauma created by colonization and Westernization in the Arab world has resulted in a deep revival of various Islamic religious sciences—a cultural fact that we still witness today. It is perhaps true that the Islamic tradition has been invoked and manipulated differently by various people for the sake of their own interests and objectives. But, it is also conceivable to argue that new tools of conceptualization, ones that do not neglect the traditional meaning and source of knowledge, have to be created in order to assess the present intellectual and religious situation in the Arab world. I would, therefore, venture to propose that the rationalization of any religious tradition, be it Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist, is harmful, since it would totally wipe out the core of that religion—a core which is based on the notion of spirituality and the Unseen, and would render the religious unreligious and even atheistic.

Let us move on to yet another controversial topic: the issues of modernity and modernization. Boullata is in search of an Arab brand of modernity, perhaps one similar to Japan's (p. 3). He is not explicit about the contents (substance), social relevance, and educational dimensions of this modernity in Arab societies. It seems to me, however, that he is interested in a particular brand of modernity—the Western one. Though one could argue that modernity is a cross-cultural phenomenon, indistinguishable, in many instances, from the progress and evolution of culture and thought in a society, the dominant type of modernity experienced by the Arab world in the context of Western hegemony and colonialism is the Western one. Any serious study of the impact of Western modernity on modern Arab society has to consider the following questions: What is the historical background, and what are the contents of Western modernity? Is (Western) modernity identical with secularization, scientific progress, modernization, industrialization, nihilism, and Westernization? Has modernity fundamentally challenged traditional elite and folk religious traditions in the Arab and Muslim world? And, what has been the general impact of modernity on non-Western societies and cultures?

Unfortunately, Boullata does not address these questions, though in the view of many Third World intellectuals these have been questions of a high-ranking order (Laroui 1987; Maḥmūd 1974; Djait 1986; and Chatterjee 1986).

What, therefore, is modernity? In his classical study of modernity, Marshall Berman (1982) defines it as a mode of vital existence and experience. He says:

There is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience 'modernity.' To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish (p. 15).

Berman identifies the salient features of modernity by locating it in the following three historical epochs: The first is from the 1500s to the 1700s. The thinkers of this period "grope desperately but half blindly for an adequate vocabulary; they have little or no sense of a modern public or community within which their trials and hopes can be shared" (*ibid.*, 17). The second epoch begins with the revolutionary wave of the 1790s, and the third takes place in the twentieth century. In this century, "the process of modernization expands to take in virtually the whole world, and the developing world culture of modernism achieves spectacular triumphs in art and thought" (*ibid.*, 17).

From the above, one can conclude that historically speaking, Europe has long been going through a unique process of social and epistemological transformation. In this context, one major philosophical issue occupying the minds of modernist European thinkers has been an appropriate theory of knowledge. In other words, the quest has been to search for foundational knowledge which is not legitimized by metaphysics. We see this transition, for instance, in the works of Locke, Descartes, and Kant very clearly. This development definitely led to the secularization of knowledge. In addition, these thinkers asked themselves the question about the possible relationship between philosophy, as epistemology or foundation of knowledge, and other areas of life: society, ethics, and history. Rorty, for example, maintains that there was a real secularization of many areas of thought, including the moral

aspect of life: "The secularization of moral thought, which was the dominating concern of European intellectuals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was not then viewed as a search for a new metaphysical foundation to take the place of theistic metaphysics. Kant, however, managed to transform the old notion of philosophy – metaphysics as 'queen of sciences' because of its concern with what was most universal and least material – into the notion of 'most basic' discipline – a foundational discipline" (Rorty 1979, 132). Therefore, knowledge is not to be searched for in the realm of metaphysics, but in the domain of fluctuating human history. This, to my mind, has been one of the major consequences of the triumph of Western modernity that Boullata does not point out.

In view of the above, it is my contention that in order to understand the philosophical nature and epistemological contents of Western modernity, one has to locate five historical/epistemological "moments," facts, or trends belonging to this phenomenon: 1) Renaissance; 2) Reformation; 3) Industrialization or Scientific Culture; 4) Enlightenment, and 5) Post-Enlightenment, which includes the ideas of progress and nihilism. These constructs have given rise to major trends or themes of thought that are essentially different from Arab-Islamic thought because of the different points of reference of each system. Secularization, rationalization, individualism, humanism, progress, nihilism, and the marginalization of religion have been the main features of Western modernity. In view of this, Boullata's characterization of those Arab intellectuals who seek an answer from the traditional Islamic theory of knowledge as conservative and "reactionary" is shortsighted, to say the least. There is no doubt that every Third World intellectual has to face the challenge of modernity, because this challenge is unavoidable. But does this mean that one has to succumb to the main tenets of modernity, such as nihilism, secularization, and pure rationalism?

Also, any Third World intellectual should be conscious of: 1) the way modernity has been translated into the theory of modernization, which simply seeks to transform the Third World into the image of the technologically triumphant West; and 2) the use of "modernization theory" as an academic paradigm to shape and direct the fields of Islamic, Arab, and Middle Eastern studies. Habermas (1987) gives the following definition of modernization: "'Modernization' was introduced as a technical term only in the 1950s. It is the mark of the theoretical approach that takes up Weber's problem but elaborates it with the tools of social-scientific functionalism. The concept of modernization refers to a bundle of processes that are cumulative and mutually reinforcing: to the formation of capital and the mobilization of resources; to the development of forces of production and the increase in the productivity of labor; to the establishment of centralized political power and the formation of national identities; to the proliferation of rights of political

participation, of urban forms of life, and of formal schooling; to the secularization of values and norms; and so on" (p. 2). Also, in a recent study on Islam and liberalism, the American political scientist Leonard Binder contends that modernization theory is only "an academic transfer of the dominant, and ideologically significant paradigm employed in research on the American political system" (Binder 1988, 24). The majority of classical and contemporary American/Western "modernization" theorists underestimate the significance of Islam as a cultural system and as a religious and ideological phenomenon. They usually consider such factors as education, urbanization, media exposure, and economic productivity to be the main determinants behind the transition of a society from a traditional mode of existence to a modern (Western) one. In the same vein, "modernization" theorists and their numerous disciples fail to present an adequate formulation of the relationship between Islam and society in the postcolonial phase. In one sense, Islam gets "atomized" and reduced to a peripheral status in Middle Eastern societies: "Islam in its various forms, and categories, and applications, is only a part of Middle East culture, and by itself accounts for little" (*ibid.*, 80-81).

Though I do not claim that Boullata agrees completely with Binder's theoretical premises, he nevertheless falls under the spell of "modernization theory." Therefore, it would be accurate to assume that Boullata calls for the Arabization of the key principles and notions of the "modernization paradigm," and for reducing the role of Islam to a mere relationship between an individual and God, thus neglecting the fundamental social principles of Islam and the ethos of Islamic social solidarity and social justice. In other words, Boullata accepts the "modernization/Westernization" of Arab society and rejects its Islamization. And this, I believe, is a dangerous proposal, especially if seen in the light of modern history and the subjugation of the Arab/Muslim world to Western powers.

Boullata employs a "summary approach" in his book. This method, I believe, can be highly reductionist, especially if a comparative method is missing. Because of the lack of the latter approach, Boullata's treatment of Hasan Ḥanafī's work (pp. 40-45) appears to be reductionist. It is well known that Ḥanafī is one of the leading Egyptian thinkers today who values the role of religion in society. To my mind, the discussion of his thought should be situated in the context of the revival of Arab-Islamic philosophy as pioneered by Shaykh Muṣṭafā 'Abd al Rāziq in the 1920s and 1930s (Anawati and Bormans 1982; Abu-Rabi' 1988). For instance, Boullata summarizes Ḥanafī's position on the Islamic schools of thought by saying that the latter accounts for four major schools of thought in Islam: theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and Sufism. Any scholar familiar with the revival of traditionalist Islamic philosophy in modern Egypt will realize that these schools were thoroughly discussed by Shaykh Muṣṭafā 'Abd al Rāziq, who, in a unique way, influenced

a number of leading philosophers in modern Egypt, including Ibrāhīm Madkūr, Shaykh ‘Abd al Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, and Ḥasan Ḥanafī.

There is no doubt that one major thinker in the modern Arab world is Muḥammad A. al Jābirī. But here too we have to understand the intellectual formation of al Jābirī against the background of critical Arab thought in North Africa. In his book *Al Khitāb al ‘Arabī al Mu‘āṣir* he is greatly indebted to the work of Abdullah Laroui. There is no doubt that al Jābirī is still searching for proper conceptual tools to deal with the problematic of tradition and Westernization, and how they relate to the current conceptual space of the Arab world. Boullata maintains that “al-Jabiri’s is the most serious attempt in the Arab world to go beyond ideology to epistemology in order to analyze the workings of the Arab mind” (p. 45). This is only true to the extent that we measure this statement against the intellectual output of such leading North African philosophers and thinkers as Mālik Bennabī, ‘Abd al ‘Azīz Lahbābī, ‘Abdullah Laroui, Ḥishām Djait, and Muḥammad Arkūn.

Boullata starts chapter three, which he entitles “The Modern Relevance of Islam and the Qur’an,” with discussing Sayyid Quṭb’s work. He claims that “the concept of modern *jāhiliyyah* is pivotal in the understanding of Sayyid Quṭb’s *radical thought*” (emphasis added) (p. 58). What is *jāhiliyyah*? Boullata says that “the usage of Jahiliyyah, developed from the writings of Abū al A’lā al Mawdūdī (d. 1979), considers as evil many prevailing aspects of modern life, including those in the Arab world imitating Westerners or imbued with the values of the West, whether they are beliefs, customs, laws, and institutions, or arts, literatures, philosophies, or people’s visions” (p. 58). And, “it is evident that Sayyid Quṭb’s thought is ahistoric, in that it does not recognize the factors of time and place in the development of Islam but rather presents it dogmatically as a monolithic and complete system from its inception” (p. 62). What is Sayyid Quṭb’s *radical thought*? Is it his thought on *Social Justice in Islam*, or on *The Battle between Islam and Capitalism*, or on *Islam and Universal Peace*, all of which were written before he joined the Ikhwān movement in 1951? Or is it his mature Qur’anic exegesis, which, to my mind, is a brilliant elaboration of the Qur’anic principles in the light of doctrinal, social, and political needs and problems of modern Muslims (Cragg 1985)? Perhaps what Boullata means by Quṭb’s radical thought is the kind of thought that Quṭb developed, especially in his famous *Ma‘ālim fī al Ṭarīq*, under the impact of horrible prison conditions, which ended in his torture and execution by the Nasser regime in 1966.

Furthermore, Boullata does not situate the discussion of Quṭb’s ideas in the context of modern Arab and Islamic thought. As a diverse and complex “intellectual” or “epistemological” construct, Arab thought can be broken down into the following discourses: 1) renaissance discourse; 2) political discourse; 3) national discourse; 4) philosophical discourse; and 5) Islamic doctrinal

discourse (Diyāb 1988). The Islamic doctrinal discourse, which is the most controversial out of the five, concerns the purification of the fundamentals of religion. As Laoust puts it: "No doctrinal reform is possible without return to an original source" (Laoust 1932; Voll 1983). *Iṣlāḥ* is the return to the just form of religion, and the affirmation of transcendent truth in a modern setting. This reformist program has dominated Arab intellectual activity up to the present time. It revolves around the affirmation of "a traditionalist method and language" in a modern setting. Clearly, we can locate Quṭb's thought within this context of *iṣlāḥ*. In addition, the Islamic doctrinal discourse can be subdivided into the following trends: 1) Shari'ah trend, which was represented by the Azhar ulama; 2) oppositional trend; 3) reformist trend, which was carried on by the disciples of 'Abduh and Riḍā; and the 4) metahistorical and utopian trend, which he calls mystical. Of these four main trends, the Muslim Brotherhood took the leading role in Egyptian society and, later on, politics.

Quṭb's ideas did not develop in a religious and social vacuum, as we are led to believe by Boullata. The historicity of his ideas should be understood against the background of Egyptian society in the first half of this century (Haddad 1983; Aẓm 1980). Social life in Egypt in the phase under consideration was the scene of the collision and struggle of opinions and parties. Intellectual life was in general tumultuous and agitated. Quṭb did not belong to the theological environment of the Azhar; nor did he develop, at the early stage of his life, a systematic philosophical doctrine. Being distant from theological and philosophical disputations, he was drawn to the world of literature and literary criticism. Quṭb's inward intellectual ripening culminated with his transition from the world of literature to that of religion. Undoubtedly, Quṭb was experiencing bitter internal struggles, which are characteristic of those who have a high measure of intellectual and social consciousness.

In like manner, Boullata does not analyze the main Quṭbian texts of the 1940s which clearly show Quṭb's transformation from an *adīb*, preaching art for art's sake, to an engaged social critic (Musallam 1983). Quṭb's social commitment became apparent in the late 1940s just before his departure for a training mission in the United States, and this is clear in his book *Social Justice in Islam* (1949). Two things are clear about Quṭb between 1947 and 1952. First, he was totally disillusioned by the social and economic situation in Egypt. He sought to remedy this situation by presenting an idealistic alternative in *Social Justice*. Here he emerged as an anti-establishment intellectual. Second, his *The Battle between Islam and Capitalism* (1951) reflects his mature and realistic social understanding of conditions in Egypt (Carre 1984). He wrote this work after he returned to Egypt from the United States in 1950. It is clear that Quṭb paid close attention to the expansion of capitalism in his native land.

Contrary to Boullata's contention that the concept of *jāhiliyah* is at the basis of Qutb's thought (radical or not), I would venture to suggest that *questions of method* preoccupied Qutb's mind a great deal, and, consequently, they can provide us with an adequate understanding of his ideas and their evolution. For instance, in his search for a proper methodology as a means to assess the relevance of the Islamic religious tradition, he dwells on the notion of religion or *dīn*. In this regard, he distinguishes between four distinct meanings of the term: 1) *dīn* as a belief system (epistemological construct), which means that *dīn* has universal and ideal rules and principles (theological abstraction); 2) *dīn* as rites and rituals; 3) *dīn* as a nation (Qutb, *Fī Zilāl al Qur'ān*, Volume III, p. 1444); and 4) *dīn* as a human translation of these universal principles and rules. Qutb calls this translation *'aḳīdah* or *manhaj* — a doctrine or a method which is dynamic and revolutionary.

As an epistemological construct, religion is a reflection of the infallible universal commands that characterized the history of humanity. The practical application of these commands is a reflection of the dynamism of *'aḳīdah*. *'Aḳīdah* is not static, neutral, ahistorical, and asocial. On the contrary, it is a dynamic social and historical movement that should seek to transform the world of man: "defeated (Muslim) scholars have basically accepted the Western understanding of religion as a mere doctrine in man's conscience, and as having no relation to realistic programs of life" (ibid., p. 1443).

Qutb argues that theology or doctrine (*'aḳīdah*) is a method. What is the nature and what are the contents of this method? And how is it related to other human disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, or history? As a method, Qutb says, *'aḳīdah*, far from being didactic, is revolutionary in nature. It is almost an ideology. Its function is to transform the current un-Islamic categories, laws, and principles into Islamic ones. As such, at the heart of this method lies Qutb's theory of knowledge. His sole aim is to reconstruct the authentic Islamic theory of knowledge and apply it in history. One dimension of this theory of knowledge is epistemology, and the other is ontology. Ontology is a complex term that includes all being, especially human relations.

In understanding Muslim ontology in the twentieth century, Qutb develops universal/abstract and specific/practical concepts, categories, and principles. It is almost impossible to understand Qutb's general method if one does not delineate these universal and particular ideas and concepts. Qutb's universal principles can be understood at the following levels: 1) metaphysical qualities; 2) primordial human qualities; 3) historical principles; and 4) social events or situations. In terms of social situations, a person is perceived as a responsible being who is related ontologically to other beings, and who has a sense of social responsibility.

One can say that in developing his ontology, Qutb, besides studying the

semantic meaning of the key concepts of the Qur'anic *weltanschauung* and the changes the Qur'an introduced to the semantic structure of the Arabic language of the *jāhiliyah*, discusses these basic formulations against the socio-economic, cultural, and political background of early Islam. Connected closely to this is Qutb's preoccupation, as suggested earlier, with the relevance of the Qur'anic *weltanschauung* to the modern conditions of Islam. As such, I suppose that one has to study Qutb's ontology as a dynamic, relational, and concrete one. Furthermore, this ontology has to be studied in totality as a comprehensive whole. In other words, one has to dissect the multilayer relationship of meaning developed by Qutb. Therefore, it would be a mistake to study Qutb's key concepts in isolation from each other, precisely because this level of study would obstruct the real meaning(s) of the author and the interrelationships of these meanings. And, consequently, it would be erroneous to assume, as does Boullata, that one concept, such as *jāhiliyah*, could carry the whole weight of meaning(s) intended by Qutb. This term, which is frequently used by Qutb, has to be studied in relation to other key terms used, and in relation to the transformation of Islamic epistemology in the past few centuries as well.

When talking about the ontological elements in the Qutbian discourse, one can define the following areas: 1) *Ummatic* vs. Tribal Entity. Here the individual owes allegiance to something more abstract and universal than a specific tribe. Human bondage is based on divine principles that, ideally speaking, culminated with the historical experience of the Prophet (ṢAAS) and his companions. The Muslim individual is perceived as an innovating, laboring, patient, and dynamic being. Therefore, the Muslim's self-consciousness is a consciousness of the ultimate concern, of God, and of his/her place in relation to the community at large. In an abstract sense, the Muslim is responsible to no one except God. Practically speaking, he/she should represent the conscience of the group or the ummah; and 2) Ideal vs. Real. Qutb's *élan vital* is the dynamism of the doctrine. The doctrine is not a document to be recited day and night, but a method for action. If Muslims act responsibly, according to the divine revelation, their sense of commitment would transform them from *jāhiliyah* to Islam. Action, vitality, commitment, initiative, sacrifice, relatedness, and universalism are the qualities of an "authentic" Muslim.

Qutb's preoccupation with a correct theory of knowledge also led him to produce an ontological-epistemological methodology. A thinker should be able to erect the conceptual foundations of a discipline epistemologically, and should, at the same time, share in the creative process ontologically. Detached/engaged duality should characterize the modern builders of systems of thought. The following quotation from Tillich could succinctly summarize Qutb's methodology: "epistemology, the 'knowledge' of knowing, is a part

of ontology, the knowledge of being, for knowing is an event within the totality of events. Every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological. Therefore, it is more adequate to begin an analysis of existence with the question of being rather than with the problem of knowledge" (Tillich 1953, 71). Qutb argues implicitly that the problem of modern Muslims lies in their divorce of epistemology from ontology, and that the proper reconstruction of the essential connection between being and knowledge entails a holistic approach that begins with the question of transcendence. Thus, Qutb's main goal is to work out a thorough reconstruction of theology as an *a priori* foundation of the human and social sciences. In other words, he keeps referring to transcendence as the root of human knowledge. In this light, Qutb's use of the concept of *jāhiliyyah*, which is considered by Boullata to be pivotal, amounts to nothing more than a second-class epistemological meaning and value. There are other primary epistemological constructs used by Qutb.

Lastly, I think that Boullata's treatment of Qutb is similar, in many ways, to that of the Israeli orientalist Emmanuel Sivan, who claims that: "The core of Sayyid Qutb's ideas thus consists in a total rejection of modernity – following in this his Indian teachers Maudoodi and Nadvi – since modernity represents the negation of God's sovereignty (*hākimiyyah*) in all fields of life and relegation of religion to the dustbin of history" (Sivan 1985, 27). Here Sivan, just like Boullata, searches for external answers that do not adequately portray the domestic (Egyptian) historical influences upon Qutb's life.

In chapter four, entitled "Dependency and Cultural Liberation," Boullata analyzes the work of Hisham Sharabi. He contends that "Hisham Sharabi recognizes the traditional, authoritarian and coercive structure of contemporary Arab society. He analyzes it soberly and with the grand strokes of a master, though he is not a sociologist" (p. 88). Boullata refers to Sharabi's recent book, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (1988). Though Sharabi's work is much more theoretically sophisticated than Boullata's, it is not without its own faults. That is to say that Sharabi's goal is to evaluate the socioeconomic, political, and religious conditions of the post-colonial Arab world by using patriarchy and dependency as two key analytic and interpretive concepts. His project fails to achieve its stated goals – mainly the deconstruction and dismantling of the cultural and social bases of neopatriarchy – because of both its faulty theorization and the very alternative it presents – modernity.

Sharabi argues that neopatriarchy is the modern historical culmination of the patriarchy that started before Islam and kept a strong presence well into the modern period. Never paying sufficient attention to the complex social and historical formations arising in the Arab world since Islam, Sharabi argues unconvincingly that patriarchy followed a monolithic form of historical development starting with the pristine form, and passing from the traditional

to the premodern, to the modern. This "modern" patriarchy – neopatriarchy – (which is neither modern nor traditional according to Sharabi) – is a particular sociopolitical structure that emerged in the wake of the colonization of the Arab world by Europe. In this context, Sharabi severely attacks the hegemonic European presence in the Arab world because it led, according to him, to a two-way movement of exploitation: the expropriation of land and the dispossession of the colonized population (Sharabi 1988, 68). One wonders how Sharabi can attack Europe's colonization of the Arab world so strongly, yet accept its other form of cultural hegemony – modernity – as the alternative to the current state of affairs in the Arab world. And it seems to me that Boullata himself has fallen into the same trap. He offers modernity as a solution, yet he seems to have problems with Western hegemony.

Boullata concludes chapter four by saying that "in their various ways, all the Arab thinkers discussed in this chapter are cultural critics of Arab society." In this he does not advance a step beyond Sharabi's essay on the "Cultural Critics of Contemporary Arab Society" (Sharabi 1987).

Chapter five on the "Voices of Arab Women" (pp. 119-37) discusses the thoughts of a few leading Arab women, such as Zaynab al Ghazālī, Bint al Shāṭi', Nawāl al Saḍāwī, and Fatima Mernissi. The author does not discuss or analyze any particular thesis. Though his discussion can be useful as a textbook to those who have no knowledge of the issues and questions that modern Arab women grapple with, it would have been more useful, perhaps, to treat a particular issue, i.e., patriarchy, veil, education of women, in a comparative perspective. For example, a number of feminist writers have suggested that the current resurgence of Islam has led to a comparable revival of patriarchy in Arab society (Marshall 1984). Perhaps treating such an issue would have been more interesting than just summarizing the ideas of some women authors.

In conclusion, the discipline of Arab/Islamic thought is still awaiting its own historian. It is necessary to write a consistent and precise history of the main presuppositions, themes, and features of modern Arab/Islamic thought. One cannot, I believe, discuss this thought except in relation to the internal developments, as well as to the external influences upon it. The major external influence is the West, which is a constellation of forces that developed against the tumultuous background of Europe and America over a period of several centuries.

Furthermore, any serious discussion of modern Arab/Islamic thought has to be situated historically in the important debates which have been taking place in the Arab world since the *nahḍah*. No serious discussion of Arab/Islamic thought can be accomplished unless the theoretical formulations of Zakī N. Mahmūd, 'Ādil Hussain, Maḥmūd A. al 'Ālim, Ḥishām Djait,

'Abdullah Laroui, Şādiq J. al Aẓm, Muḥammad A. Jābirī, and others are considered seriously.

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