Book Reviews


This intensely personal narrative is a modern argument about an ancient question: how is a moral individual to conduct himself in an immoral environment?

In a remarkable introduction, the author (born in 1970 in the United States) informs us that this project arose because of “questions of religious ideology” that led his family to return to the US from Iran in the wake of the 1979 revolution, only to be confronted by a similar, ongoing, inquisition in post-9/11 America. In America, he turned to Persian mystic poets, in the hope that they would help him “recover the fluid religiosity of my childhood. Like many other expatriate Iranians, I sought to—and perhaps needed to—identify a de-politicized (and preferably de-historicized) realm of spiritual poetry out of which I could resurrect a worldview that was at once spiritual and rational, tolerant and modern” (pp. xxi–xxii).

Safi writes that he found this fluid religiosity in “an oppositional sufi” ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Abū ’l-Ma‘āli ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alî ibn al-Hasan al-Mayānji al-Hamadānī (492–525/1098–1131), who possessed “all the qualifications of being a powerful insider,” being “a judge, a sufi [ṣūfī], a popular preacher, etc.,” but used his position “not to bargain with the Saljūqs but to rise against them, defiantly contesting their legitimacy” (p. 158) and was executed for it at the age of thirty three in Isfahan. “He was for me Rumi [Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273)] and Ibn ‘Arabi [Muḥyī l-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Alî (d. 638/1240)], poet and social critic, lover and philosopher, all wrapped up in one.” The book, originally a doctoral dissertation, represents the author’s attempt “to figure out something about why he was killed.” The answer, an erudite, intellectually disciplined account of a journey of the soul, is presented in six chapters. The first three set out the
methodological framework, as becomes a dissertation; the last three examine three stylised responses: capitulation, negotiation, or opposition.

With some simplification of the author’s complex and nuanced account the storyline may be sketched as follows. The Saljuqs were nominal Muslims, who contested and negotiated with the Caliph, and—through the vezir—coerced all (especially, notable scholars and mystics), in their quest for power. This is exemplified in the life of Nizam al-Mulk (408–485/1018–1092) whose complex negotiations on politics and “ideology” were the proximate determinants of the substance of religious orthodoxy and sufi lore of the times. In addition to personal influence, the “state apparatus” of surveillance, land-grants, madrasahs and khanaqahs was employed to ensure compliance.

How did individuals respond to this environment? Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (450–505/1058–1111) accepted the patronage of Nizam al-Mulk; contrary to accounts of his “allegedly spiritual quest” (p. 204) al-Ghazali “was, and remained forever, a political creature” (p. 109), not above using “the ultimate trump card, the Qur’an” (p. 120) to legitimize obedience to the Saljuqs. Less closely linked to power than the madrasah ulama’, some sufis—Baha Tahir (‘Uryan, dates uncertain), Abu Sa’id Abi l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), and Shaykh Ahmad ibn Abu l-Hasan Ahmad-i Jam, Zindahfil (d. 536/1141)—employed “spiritual blackmail” (p. 129) by asking for support for sufis and khanaqahs, in return for enhancing legitimacy by their blessings, “supportive” visions, and wondrous deeds (karamati). Finally, there is the “oppositional”—the posture approved by fellow-emigre, Edward Said—sufi, ‘Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani, a student of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s works and his brother’s (Abu l-Futuh Ahmad al-Ghazali, d. 520/1126) disciple, who was executed for his refusal to legitimize the Saljuqs and his opposition to their ideology.

Omid Safi brings to this tale his formidable linguistic abilities (including Persian, Arabic, and Turkish), his command over the literature (having read over seventy thousand pages of original sources, over ten to fifteen years), his disciplined academic approach, and above all, the angst and passion of the mystic in exile. At the same time the text is quite contemporary, not just in vocabulary and method, but in intellectual tastes and opinions as well. This lends the work a quality of excellence that is rare in works based on doctoral dissertations that are published.

The author tells us what he is not going to do: “It has not been my aim in this project to find shelter in the cool shade of positivist historicism” nor to attempt “to write the history of the Saljuqs” (p. 201). In this way, he is able to maintain that “perhaps the clearest demarcation between the two is that ‘Ayn al-Qudat had to defend himself against the charges of heresy which were laid
out—not to mention accepted and applied within one generation—by Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī” (p. 172, italics added). This leaves the reader with the impression that it was al-Ghazālī who accused Hamadānī, which is problematic: ‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadānī was only thirteen years old when Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī died at the age of fifty five; and the two never met.

What Safi means probably is better put by Norris: “… the charges of heresy which were brought against him by his accusers, [were] charges which had been specified by al-Ghazālī himself as meriting instant execution.” 1 In other words, the charges framed by al-Hamadānī’s political opponents drew upon al-Ghazālī’s reflections on the line between belief and disbelief and on the punishment for heresy, which is quite a different matter.

Safi does realise that “What he was killed for had to do with the politics of the Saljuq court,” on which Hamid Dabashi sheds much additional light; 2 but there is little in Safi’s account to support his thesis that al-Hamadānī was killed because of “the challenge he represented [unlike al-Ghazālī] to the dominant Saljuq religious ideology” (p. 205). In fact, as Dimitri Gutas notes in a different context, his execution “took place not because of his philosophical beliefs but, even as al-Bayhaqī [‘Alī b. Zayd (d. 565/1170)] reports [in his Tatimmat Siwān al-Hikmah] ‘on account of an enmity, between him and the vizier Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Anasābādī...’”3 As for capitulation versus opposition, unlike Safi, Ebrahim Moosa, for example, sees al-Hamadānī and al-Ghazālī, along with Manṣūr al-Hallāj (d. 309/922), each inspired by his predecessor, as fellow travellers who “refused to yield to the hegemonic discourses of his day.”4

‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadānī has been the subject of an earlier work by Hamid Dabashi. 5 Omid Safi has examined that work and concludes his appraisal by: “In reading and writing about ‘Ayn al-Qudat, Dabashi is working

5 Hamid Dabasdi, Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of ‘Ayn al-Qu dat (New York: Routledge, 1999).
through some of his own angst as an expatriate, postcolonial Iranian intellectual" (p. 167). This is also true of the work under review. Yet, as another reviewer of Dabashi’s work, Joseph Lumbard notes: “Ayn al-Qudat is an exhilarating thinker who deserves to be properly introduced to specialists and non-specialists alike.” Omid Safi has taken a notable step in this direction.

Arshad Zaman


This is a post 9/11 impressionistic work by an American journalist with years of experience covering the Middle East at the Cairo desk of *The Washington Post.* The aim is to explain the issue of religious terrorism in the Middle East by focusing on Egypt. *Passion for Islam* gazes into the complex personal, political, cultural and intellectual dimensions involved in creating a “combustible environment” (p. 7) in the country. According to the author, common Egyptians are struggling to live with dignity in the face of widespread corruption and nepotism, tremendous economic inequality, and brutal state repression. These stark realities form the backdrop for Murphy to gauge the various “choices” guided by the *Passion for Islam,* ranging from the violent to the democratically-committed reinterpretations of Islamic mores and tradition. Non-violent Islamic responses often fail to register in the West due to a pervasive and misguided identification of Islam with violence. This misunderstanding arises out of a lack of historical contextualization on the part of Westerners, and their failure to understand the relevance of religion in Egyptian culture; these are precisely the deficiencies the book aims to address. The issue of “religious terrorism emanating from the Middle East has to be understood—not excused” (p. 7); and to reach that understanding, *Passion for Islam* attempts to reassess “Radical Islam” in the context of three broad historical forces of (1) revivalism, (2) authoritarianism, and (3) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to Murphy, these historical forces provide the

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much needed framework to understand not only religious terrorism, but also to situate Islam as a living faith in today’s world.

Passion of Islam is divided into fourteen chapters out of which fully six are dedicated to “Political Islam,” and a chapter each for “Pious Islam,” “Cultural Islam,” and “Faith and Modernity.” The last section “People of the Book” contains two chapters, with one focusing on religious minorities in Egypt and the other on the volatile issue of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The introduction spans two chapters with a single chapter in the final section titled “The Path Ahead.” In tracing the Egyptian trajectory, Murphy writes that religion has always been at the heart of Egyptian life, and that this identification with Islam has recently become stronger and more robust leading to what the author calls “a grassroots groundswell” (p. 7). Visible display of this religiosity can be seen in the following trends: “Ramadan observance” (p. 26), the “ever-growing number of women who have chosen to wear the veil” (p. 28) and “expanding charity networks.” The despair felt by common people living in the pervasive corruption of everyday Egyptian life and bleak economic conditions has resulted in a yearning by Egyptians to seek solace in religion, giving them a sense of empowerment in a way that other ideologies have failed to do. Furthermore, this “Pious Islam” (p. 27) has received an injection of the harsh and inflexible strain of Wahhabi conservatism through the influx of migrant workers and Saudi money. And finally, the brief romance with Nasserism came to a screeching halt after defeat at the hands of Israel in the 1967 war, a defeat that struck in the very core of Arab honour, setting off “years of anguished soul searching” (p. 31) and adding to the sense of urgency. In this backdrop of pessimism Egyptians are in increasing numbers turning towards Islam.

“Political Islam” is an expression of the population of the desire for a return to an Islamic order in society. In search for a new paradigm, Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s perception of the need for original thinking in Islam was overshadowed by the more conservative ideas of Hassan Al Banna [Ḥasan al-Banna] (d. 1368/1949) and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1386/1966), whom the author holds responsible for introducing the ideological impetus for violence. Nevertheless, large numbers of Islamists are struggling to find a balance between democratic ideals and Islam through peaceful means, but these aspirations are helplessly cornered between a government that regularly uses torture, on one hand, and the unforgiving and conservative teachers of al-Azhar who fiercely oppose any efforts to reform, on the other. Furthermore, the intellectual underpinnings of democratic-friendly Islamist parties are still very unconvincing, and the educated elite of the secular class lacks the “stamina” (p. 160) to either resist the government or counter the Islamists in
any meaningful way. Hence, the failure of democratic consensus to take root in Egypt since independence has conspired to lend credence to violence in certain quarters of the society. Violence holds a quixotic-like appeal in such grim circumstances among poor youth on whose shoulders the burden of this stalemate weighs most heavily.

“Cultural Islam,” like “Political Islam,” is entangled with the issue of Arab identity and with the desire to save Egypt from turning into a “cultural clone of the West” (p. 170). However, this concern, unlike “Political Islam,” is shared even by the secularists. In sharp contrast to such concern and fear, American culture is ubiquitous in Egyptian society in the form of television soap operas, fast-food outlets, films, shopping malls, and video arcades. The adoption of the Western lifestyle by the elite is seen as part and parcel of the wider, corrupt political order backed by Western powers. The resentment of the masses finds release in religious conservatism to counter the “cultural invasion” of Arab customs and values. Western culture is considered immoral, shameless, decadent, and devoid of any spirituality. Such “warped notions of American life” (p. 174), argues the author, are picked up from television and films which instils in an Egyptian audience the fear of losing their own heritage by following the West. The reassertion of Egyptian-ness in terms of culture has a direct bearing on the issue of religious reform, and proves particularly vexing for Westerners when categories such as feminism, individualism, secularism, human rights and pluralism are challenged or even rejected.

Finally, religious revivalism in Egypt is giving way to “stubbly mushrooms of new thinking sprouting all over the forest floor” (p. 199). Scholars like Hasan Hanafi and Nasr Hāmid Abū Zayd are offering radical insights into how to approach Islam in modernity, and are facing vehement opposition from the traditional scholars who claim to hold the only authority on religious matters. The neglect of ījtihād and adoption of taqlid in the classical religious education led to the stagnation of Islam’s scholarly tradition in the hands of the class of scholars who hold religious authority. As a result, Muslims are facing great difficulty in dealing with modern issues and questions, as to do so requires a major appraisal of Islam’s theological framework and a renewed understanding of its basic conceptual notions of tawḥīd and revelation in the light of modern knowledge.

The cultural, political, and intellectual crisis within Islam is further exacerbated by authoritarian regimes that exploit religion to suit its agenda, and because Islam holds the strongest appeal for the Egyptians, it is the easiest tool for manipulation. The frustration resulting from Egypt’s inability to break from the deadlock creates a fertile ground for violence as a means to
confront the injustices of society, in which the government becomes the target in the pursuit of establishing a truly Islamic state that would rid Egypt of all its woes and problems. Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to keep “the area on a war like footing” (p. 253) fanning Muslim militancy and providing a justification for authoritarian governments to indefinitely delay internal reforms.

Among the countless books on Islam flooding the bookshelves around the world cautioning against the menace of Islam, this book chooses a different route by acknowledging (1) that all Muslims are not militants, (2) that there is diversity in Muslim responses to current issues and dilemmas, (3) that the Islamist parties play a social welfare role which has its positive impact on the lives of people, (4) that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major fault-line central to the issue of religious violence in the Middle East, (5) that America’s unequivocal and one-sided support for Israel is a cause of major resentment, and (6) that in the vicious cycle of religious violence, all sides are victims. The book also contains a balanced and well-written analysis of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt.

However, despite these noble overtures, and a attempt to understand, and perhaps for a moment, to lend a sympathetic ear to the point of view of the other, the work is marred by the author’s failure to fully account for the history that unleashed the forces that the author highlights in addressing the issue of religious terrorism. The colonial past of the Middle East, particularly the various forms of colonial violence, is crucial to understanding modern Egyptian society—and this is factor Murphy manages to exclude. This omission of a very critical phase in Middle Eastern history seriously undermines the book’s effort to probe deeper into the modern malaise of Egyptian society.

The second equally problematic component is the dissonance between the book’s objective and its overall treatment of the subject. As it is clear from the opening pages, the book’s aim of unraveling the issue of religious violence was provoked by the effect of this violence on the lives of Americans and Europeans, such as in the case of the brutal attacks on Western tourists on their way to visit Egypt’s ancient sites and, particularly, the involvement of Egyptians in 9/11, which personally affected Murphy and motivated her to engage with the issue. Murphy embarks on an ambitious project of investigating the entire spectrum of Islam, explaining the nature of Muslim piety, commenting on politics, highlighting Egyptian cultural paranoia and insecurities, and documenting the struggle for religious authority within Muslim intellectuals to account for the problem within Islam. In other words, it attempts to explain what went wrong [with Islam], bringing to mind Bernard
Lewis’s ahistorical and racist polemic published in 2003. The roots of religious terrorism, when seen from this perspective, have little to do directly with the broader patterns of colonial and neo-colonial violence in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. A closer look at the West’s economic and political interference in the Middle East would have added a much-needed perspective to understand the turmoil in the Middle East. If Islamic militancy is to be understood, it must be in the context of Western history, sensibilities, perceptions or misperceptions, moral strengths and failings, political ideologies and doctrines. Simply, the problem of religious terrorism is not only about Islam’s internal struggle but is equally that of the “West’s.” Passion for Islam pitches a static, monolithic traditional Islam refusing to come to terms with modernity. Essentially, the issue of religious authority in Islam results from institutional disagreements between two very different systems of knowledge. Murphy fails to realize that the impetus to reform Islam was a central preoccupation of colonial powers and for that purpose certain institutions were chosen or new ones established to do exactly that. This created a fracture between the so-called traditional scholars and the modernists who sought to challenge interpretations viewed as incompatible with modern progress. This has, indeed, resulted in fragmentation of religious authority and the emergence of a new class of modern intellectuals who are pushing for radical interpretations that pitch them against the traditional scholars in sometimes life-threatening ways. However, it is important to understand that tradition is not a static category; it can and is reinvented, just as modernity is not a monolithic phenomenon. One side engrossed in medieval darkness while the other looks to a modern renaissance is indeed very simplistic, as it is hackneyed.

Irfan Moeen Khan


The terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001 and the London bombings of July 2005 have drawn attention to the position of Muslims in Australia, as in other liberal democratic states. The active participation by the