

Book Review

Raymond William Baker, *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists*

reviewed by
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In the dark aftermath of September 11, a little-known but renewed quest began to take shape around the Muslim world, a quest geared at achieving social justice. If the problem of terrorism is to be addressed intelligently, religion cannot simply be brushed aside but instead must be reconfigured to meet global challenges. In a controversial bestseller, Sam Huntington asserted the continuing centrality of religion within our cantankerous modernity. Huntington argued that in Islam, religious principles serve foremost as the pivot of individual and group action and, secondly, as the basis for “clashes” between civilizations. Yet, Islam itself cannot be the problem since, like every other belief system, it can be invoked either for peace and reconciliation, or for strife. The crux of the matter is, of course, the interpretation given to governing texts, and how and why a particular interpretation becomes dominant. By misinterpreting the Quran, Sunnah and the hadiths— which form the bedrock of Islam— charismatic leaders with reactionary agendas can lead genuine believers astray.

Religious extremism strives to eclipse more reasonable discourses on “truth.” But, in contrast, the centrist Islamic tradition urges the search for social justice, equity, democracy, civil liberties, human rights and the rule of law. Given a distinct possibility of opening spaces of reason within religion, this centrist Islamic tradition counsels that we examine forces which stoke frustrations, anger and resentment toward the West. In so doing, oppression, disparities of power, illiteracy, and poverty quickly percolate to the surface. Fundamentalism obscures the reality of utter desperation; it is a grasping at dogmatic straws. The outward trappings of religiosity are a smokescreen. Of course, just as is the case with any world religion, long-term tensions exist in Islam between the politics of self-interest and the politics of religious culture.

Armed with a deep knowledge of Egypt, political science professor Raymond

Baker, who seems an enthusiastic admirer of the New Islamist school, counters the sense of hopelessness engendered (and fed upon by) by extremism with an intelligent and well-written analysis of the wider ambit of Islam. He shows that Islam, in its purest form, is a religion that focuses on freedom, equitable distribution of wealth, and the elevation of the poor, the weak and the marginalized. This volume forces us out of musty stereotypical molds—not unaided to a great extent by Western global media—that garishly paint Islam as being about nothing but zealotry, violence, and the apocalyptic destruction of the West.

The Arab Republic of Egypt underwent many upheavals since the 1952 revolution and the unsuccessful post-Nasser nationalist movements. The secular transformation within Egypt has been analyzed, but not to the same degree as the concomitant changes that occurred in the religious realm. Baker remedies this lack by showing how, in the middle of the 20th century, religious beliefs in the Arab world began to coalesce into an “Islamic Awakening,” one in which the Wassatteya developed as the key centrist Islamic mainstream. Unlike the fundamentalist strains, Wassatteya utilize its “grounding in a comprehensive and substantive understanding of the higher purposes of Islam” (p. 11) to bring about societal transformation and also enshrine social justice by the way of strengthened economic, social, and political structures.

In Egypt, the Wassatteya took its most influential form in the New Islamist group, a body of scholars, intellectuals, and activists, many of whose “corrective” works derived inspiration from the teachings of 19th century cleric Muhammad Abduh. The impact of the New Islamists resonates today in Egyptian economics, politics, and social relations—and even beyond the Egyptian and Arab spheres of influence. Their vision of making Islam functional in a modernizing Middle East—where ignorance, narrow piety, and the subjugation of women and non-Muslims have hold sway—is a feat to be accomplished through pluralistic interpretations and understandings of key Islamic texts. The New Islamist reject any religious meanings that are rigid, reified, or restrictive.

Broadly, the New Islamist school urges a return to reason, and it stresses the elimination of backwardness, naïveté, intolerance, fatalism, “other-ism,” and other misbegotten attitudes and doxas which perpetuate underdevelopment. New Islamists promulgate their vision for long-term civilizational development in the spheres of religion, gender, and identity. They repudiate

extremist Islamist assemblages that see the arts as an affront to Islam. New Islamists remind us that this cultural nihilism, vented through hatred for the arts, cannot be dissociated from misinformation and despair. “In settings of poverty and lack of hope,” Baker writes, “attack on the arts . . . in a perverse way compensate[s] for the inability to overcome . . . misery.” (p. 59)

Baker beautifully covers the salient issues of national development. The New Islamists’ focus on building community in non-exclusivist terms opens up full participation for women and non-Muslims. Justice, ethics, democracy, and egalitarian community building, these New Islamists say, are not only absolutely vital ingredients for broad-based national development but are wholly in keeping with Islamic tenets. Though they disagree with much of corporate-defined neoliberal globalization, and frown particularly at American hegemony, they insist that disengaging from the West is not a panacea for Egypt’s development, nor does the solution rest in the recesses of worn-out customs and ideas. Alert to the pitfalls of cultural blind spots, the New Islamists offer an articulation of alternative agendas that make it possible to speak on behalf of a progressive Islamic world, an agenda that honestly and fairly confronts contemporary issues that defy easy normative formulations: e.g., the lingering Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

Does Baker overrate the centrist forces in his depiction of New Islamism? No. Centrists matter in just about everything. An Islamic modernity requires centrist reasoning to operate sensibly in peace-making and ecumenically in the contested spaces of religion. The grim reality of rising inequalities, blind homogenization, and the paucity of Western imaginations that reduce Islam to “evil” are vicious particularisms that need to be completely neutralized.

Although the author’s alignment with the New Islamists occasionally may mar an impartial consideration of these sensitive issues, Baker’s book is a brilliant critical exposition of Islamic centrism. *Islam Without Fear* is a definite must-read for anyone interested in the myriad issues rooted in this culture-politics nexus. While helping us to understand the problems that beset Egyptian Muslims, it can set the stage for larger debates that create the atmosphere needed for a new world order oriented to social justice and tolerance of the “other.”

Reference: Huntington, S.P. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster

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