Intellectual Independence: Islamism and the Decentering of Europe: *disClosure* interviews S. Sayyid

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Dr. S. Sayyid is a University Research Fellow at the University of Leeds in Britain and author of the book, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (1997, Zed Books). His research explores questions concerning the politicization of Islam, the production of cultural identities, and the use of discursive methodologies to analyze structures of social power. He visited the University of Kentucky in February 2004 as part of the Spring Seminar and Lecture Series on Religion and Identity sponsored by the UK Committee on Social Theory and presented a lecture entitled 'Postcolonial Politics and Islam(ism).' Following the lecture, Dr. Sayyid sat down with members of *disClosure's* editorial collective to discuss some of the issues raised in his lecture and their entanglement with current events such as the United States' invasion of Iraq and its global pursuit of the 'War on Terror.' In the interview below, Sayyid presents his views on the differences between Islamism and Islamization, the competing claims of science and the Divine to authority within the Islamic state, and the decline of Eurocentrism manifested in the political ideology of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini.

disClosure: What is it exactly that defines Islamism as a socio-political entity?

S. Sayyid: Islamism is not a specific ideology in the sense of closed system of beliefs, values and practices. Islamism is a discourse that seeks to re-center Islam within the public realm of Muslim communities. Islamism emerges in the context of a de facto (and often de jure) displacement of Islam from the public to the private sphere. In the wake of this displacement, Islamism seeks to re-center Islam within

Muslim communities. Thus, Islamists wish to see social relations re-organized around the signifier of Islam. Islamists are committed to, they would argue, the re-politicization of Islam. This (re-) politicization arises from their opposition to the prevailing order in Muslim communities and their desire to institute a new foundation for society. Of course, there is great deal of diversity to be found among Islamists reflecting local contexts and specific historical trajectories. Such diversity, however, is a feature of all political discourses. For example, there are many differences between social democracy in Germany and social democracy in Spain, but these differences do not invalidate the existence of social democracy per se. Thus, to observe differences between Sayyid Qutb and Khomeini or Mawdudi and Ali Shariati does not put into question the unity of Islamism as a phenomenon.

It is useful to distinguish (analytically at least) Islamization from Islamism. Islamization is a strategy that emerges in the context of Islamism. Islamization is based on the blurring of frontiers between those who want to see Islam in public affairs and those who attempt to deny it such a space. Islamization is increasingly being pursued by many Muslim regimes as a means of weakening the Islamist challenge, by conceding ground on issues of cultural representation, but keeping Islam at bay from areas of public policy, international relations, and economic affairs. Whereas Islamism seeks a radical transformation of society, Islamization seeks to maintain the 'command heights' of the status quo. Islamization co-opts conservative Ulema and places the burden of representing the Islamic identity of a polity not on the regime but on those most sub-ordinated groups within society: women and minorities. Thus, regulation of the behavior of these groups becomes a marker of a community's Islamic identity. Islamization is basically a depoliticization. It argues that the way to get a good society is to have good individuals and good individuals come from the cultivation of the self. So, it actually tries to reduce Islam to simply a discipline for religious affirmation: you go to the mosque, you say your prayers, you are more pious, more committed and by that process you will then create a good society. Islamization is not the re-centering of Islam in the public realm but the intensification of the hold of Islam in the private sphere.

dC: This separation of the public from the private or the political from the religious seems to mirror the general modernist move that divides all the world into distinctive and bounded spheres of social, political, and economic relations. Are similar distinguishing moves being made by Islamists? If so, which types of distinguishing moves are they making?

SS: This, I think, is one of the most pressing questions for Islamists. A lot of Islamists would argue that Islam is a total way of life and, as such, it encompasses everything. However, the attempt to actually concretize that total way of life is actually very limited. Islamists have on the whole tended to neglect cultural production instead identifying their platforms with cultural prohibitions. Thus, there are limited Islamist attempts to develop a specific aesthetics or the full range of cultural practices available to Islamicate civilization. One of the consequences of Islamists focusing on the Medina state and seeing subsequent Muslim history as a falling away from that state, is that historical resources and achievements beyond this very exceptional historical period of Islam during the Prophet's (p.b.u.h) time remain unavailable to them. Thus, they are unable to have a conversation with their past. Too often, too many Islamists give the impression that an ideal Muslim subject is simply one who prays and carries out basic life functions. That is it. S/he has no hinterland.

dC: What do you see as the relationship between the decentring of European or Western hegemony and Islamism.

SS: I think the decentering of the West can be summarized as the abandonment of a sequence which goes from Plato to NATO. It doesn't necessarily mean the abandonment of the contents which are contained within that sequence, as you can rearticulate those contents with other kinds of sequences. I would argue that without a commitment to the de-centering of the West, the prospects for any Islamist movement becoming hegemonic is limited. Thus, the formation of Islamist hegemonies, and subsequently Islamist government, depends largely on their ability to include this de-colonial moment (that is to build on the process of decentering of the West) in

their horizons. To the extent that Islamists move away from the decolonializing moment of the decentering of the West, the prospects for an Islamist hegemony fade.

dC: In your book *A Fundamental Fear*, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini is a significant figure in that he incorporates Western notions of 'people,' 'nation,' and 'state' into his political discourse while breaking the chain of reference to Europe that is a crucial aspect of Eurocentrism. How does this work? It is not as simple as just forgetting to mention the Western heritage of some of these ideas, is it?

SS: Well, what is interesting is it's not Khomeini who said that the genealogy of these concepts is a Western one. It is actually Sami Zubaida who is reading Khomeini and articulating that genealogy. When Zubaida claims that he has recovered Western concepts like 'nation', 'people' and 'state' from Khomeini's *Al-Hukumah Al-Islamiya* (Islamic Government) his claim is not a product of excavation but rather an act of articulation which joins certain concepts like 'nas' to 'people' and locates the concept of 'people' in the Plato-to-NATO sequence. The identity of concepts comes not from their content but from their inclusion in specific chains of references. These chains of references are socially constructed. There is no necessary link between one element of the chain and the next. Not all articulations are equal, some are institutionalized and sedimented—for many people, the sequence Plato-to-NATO seems to be the 'natural' reporting of a real state of affairs rather the contingent construction of a chain of references over a period of time. Zubaida gives the impression that he sees in this sequence history not historiography.

The idea that certain elements possess a Western heritage is not an intrinsic quality of those elements or an outcome of empirical methodologies. What is considered to be part of or outside of the Western heritage is a product of the construction of Western identity through the articulation of particular chains of references. For example, one could imagine a different sequence which begins with Aristotle and sees both Islam and the West not as two distinct cultural formations but rather as part of a single 'post-Aristotelian' civilization.

Khomeini, unlike many other thinkers associated with Islamism, does not actually try to find a Western pedigree for his concepts, that is, Zubaida has to do it for him. Khomeini's refusal to cite the Western heritage is a major break with a past in which Muslim reformers have constantly justified themselves by presenting their reforms as being consistent with and legitimated by Western civilization. Khomeini's rejection of such argumentation has two major consequences: firstly, it refuses to privilege the West as the only source of the universal, and secondly, it shifts the arguments for an Islamic order from an instrumental to an ethical logic. For Khomeini, the establishment of Islamic government is not necessary because such a government would be better "in making the trains run on time" (though it may do that), rather an Islamic government has to be established because it is an obligation for Muslims. To be a Muslim means living under an Islamic government. In a sense, Khomeini's position echoes that taken by Abu Bakr following the death of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) that being a Muslim meant being a member of the Islamic state.

dC: Thinking about the move of power that Khomeini makes raises a couple of questions. How does one overcome that dominating discourse of scientific rationalization and justification? What happens when one does make the sort of definitive statement that Khomeini does? Is there a reversal of modernity's primary-secondary categorization of science versus faith? In other words, does then faith become a primary descriptor?

SS: It seems that opposition between faith and science may be a phenomenon that does not resonate among Muslims. The opposition between faith and science appears in the European context for set of contingent historical reasons, and there is little reason to assume that it can be simply extrapolated as a universal opposition. Perhaps, one of the reasons why the opposition between science and faith may not operate in Muslim contexts is that in the Islamic conception of the Divine the gap between God and human cannot be closed. Science as a human activity cannot approach the Divine. The various sociological studies that have documented the over-representation of people with scientific backgrounds within the various Islamist movements would

seem to support the idea that an opposition between science and faith is not necessarily a universal found in all cultural formations.

dC: One of the intellectual criticisms of the Western project is that it contains a teleology whereby Europe itself becomes the end goal of its own political vision of the world. We see this European vision as being derived from a Christian apocalyptic mentality. Is there a similar teleological move or progressive moment that forms an important basis of the Islamist political perspective?

SS: This is a very complex question. It turns upon two key points: the relationship between religious eschatology and political teleology, and the relationship between Islam and Islamism.

As you point out, within the Western project you see the re-occupation of Christian (theological) concepts during the progressive secularization of Western culture. Thus, themes found in Christian eschatology are also found in secularized discourses such as communism. The effort of various political movements to replace Christianity by inventing a secularized and 'rationalized' version is fairly well documented. It was not only the Nazis and Communists but also the Jacobians and Comtean positivists who sought to replace Christianity with its secularized alter-ego.

Islamism is not a secularized attempt to replace Islam. The relationship between Islam and Islamism is not that between religion and ideology. Thus, Islamism cannot be understood as political ideology based on the secularization of Islamic concepts. Islamism reads Islam as being inscribed by the political from its foundation. This can be confusing as it seems to be endorsing the Orientalist description of Islam as being unable to distinguish between the religious and the political. Such descriptions are invalid because they begin with definitions of religion and politics as distinct spheres of human activity which in deviant cases can become confused. Such arguments tend to accept the Enlightenment definition of religion. If one does not think that this definition of religion is universal, and thus, that religions that do not conform to the pattern of Latin Christianity in specific periods of its history, are still religions, then the question about the confusion of religion and politics does not have the same scandalous force. The

Islamist conception of Islam sees it as the foundation of an order- thus it is political by definition. According to Islamists, the correct interpretation of Islam recognizes its political nature and builds upon it.

Having said that, I would like add that it may not be a bad thing to be skeptical of the idea that the relationship between philosophical roots and political practice is direct or transparent. Language and philosophy are simply tools and humans use them depending on what is necessary and what is needed. If they need a particular kind of word or a particular kind of concept, they will find a way to come up with it. One has to maintain a balance between recognizing a heritage which people work through and coming to the conclusion that they can never escape from or go beyond that heritage. I think we're all working through our past but all the time it is being transformed in that act of working through.

dC: That speaks to me that in the process of encountering heritage, especially in a colonized people, there are at least two heritages to draw upon: the pre-colonial heritage and the heritage that comes from their colonial existence. In your book, I think you mentioned the word 'hybrid' once and it's not usually used in this context. I was wondering if that has something to do with the definition of the term 'hybridity' or if it has to do with Islamism's privileging of the pre-colonial heritage where most conceptualizations of hybridity privilege the European heritage?

SS: It is the case, the imposition of colonial rule was very often explicitly anti-Islamic. Partly, because in Asia and Africa European colonists often confronted a Muslim ruling establishment—an establishment they had to tame—and partly, it was a consequence of the way in which European identity was historically based on an antagonism towards Islam. One could imagine that Islamists would tend to favor the pre-colonial over the colonial, for during the pre-colonial one could still conceive of Islamdom as having autonomy.

I would agree with you that many conceptualizations of hybridity are conducted in the context of postcoloniality. Postcolonial thinkers have attempted to overcome the West/Rest colonial distinction by valorizing hybridity, demonstrating that beyond the distinction of

West/Rest, colonizers and colonized, was a complicated picture that is belied by the purity of these binary oppositions. I would also agree that construction of all identities is not a pure operation—in other words, identities are formed by bringing together (articulating) constituent elements under the domain of a particular signifier. Thus, for example, the signifier "America" erases all its internal differences: when one speaks of America in the moment one is neglecting the difference between red states and blue states, between the West coast and East coast between small town and big metropolitan areas... This is not peculiar to the operation of the signifier "America." All collectivities are formed by similar acts of erasure. There is a paradoxical relationship between difference being necessary for the constitution of identity and difference being the limit of the constitution of identity. This tension is what is stabilized by the articulation of a signifier.

dC: Your book conveys a measured optimism about the decline of Eurocentrism and the consequent possibility for different kinds of politics to emerge in places like the Islamic world. Are there other impediments that Muslims must overcome to realize such a possibility?

SS: The real issue for the Islamicate world is not a crisis of culture or a crisis of theology or anything like that but is, to put it very bluntly, a matter of political weakness. This answers the question, 'Why aren't Muslims more tolerant when they were tolerant in Andalusia?' or whatever example you want to use. Muslims are politically weak in two senses: they lack sufficient power to more or less control their destinies, and they lack a degree of political consciousness that the gravity of their situation perhaps warrants. As long as they remain politically weak, their capacity to imagine something beyond the West will be restricted.

At the same time, as a consequence of history, all the major powers of the world confront restive Muslim populations. They all seem to have a "Muslim problem". Russia has a Muslim problem in Chechnya which has caused something like a third of the Chechen population to be killed or turned into refugees since Putin's war. The Indians have a Muslim problem in Kashmir (and within their own minorities). Indian controlled Kashmir is one of the most militarized places in the world with some of the highest number of security personal per head of

population. The Chinese have a Muslim problem in their 'wild west'. The Europeans have a Muslim problem in relation to the postcolonial Muslim presence in their major conurbations. The Americans have historically had a Muslim problem through Israel, but now they also have a Muslim problem in their occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. In a sense, all the major powers have a convergence of interest dealing with restless Muslim populations. This hampers political maneuvering of Islamists- they can't really use one great power to maneuver against another because it always means abandoning some Muslim group... diplomacy in this situation implies an accommodation with the oppression of Muslims somewhere in the world. Thus, Islamists attempting to use diplomacy often find themselves out-flanked by other Islamist groups pointing to the abandonment of a Muslim population as a consequence of making common cause with a major power. If a movement seeks an accommodation with the Russians, it is forgetting about the Chechens. If it makes alliance with the Americans, it is forgetting about the Iraqis or Palestinians. In the absence of such diplomacy, the militarization of Islamism should not be such a great surprise.

dC: How much do you think the war on terror will be a force for political unification within the Muslim world?

SS: I think it depends very much on how sustained the war on terror is and to what extent it continues to provide a means by which regimes (Muslim and non-Muslim) are able to link their campaigns of eradication of Islamists with the 'war on terror'. These 'dirty wars' have now been globalized under the rubric of the 'war against terror'—thus many Muslims see the 'war on terror' as being against Islamdom in one way or another. If the 'war on terror' becomes a "permanent" feature of the new world order, an institution of a global 'dirty war', its logic will help to bring about a convergence among its various enemies. Given that the 'war on terror' has a rather nebulous conception of its enemy -easily slipping from radical Islamists to ordinary Muslims, it is likely to enhance the process of politicization of the global Muslim community. Already, we have seen how one of the consequences of the 'war on terror' is an increasing number of Muslims

becoming politically conscious. In the UK, for example, a large proportion of the Muslim population participated in million strong marches against the invasion of Iraq. For many Muslims in Britain, it was the first time they had become involved in such demonstrations. There are some indications that we are witnessing the emergence of a distinct global Muslim public opinion in which common narratives regarding current affairs are beginning to circulate. For example, the anti-Zionist reading of the Israeli-Palestinian has become hegemonic in Muslim communities through the world. Similarly, the opposition to American foreign policy is becoming increasingly widespread among Muslims. The question is whether these translocal narratives will enable ordinary Muslims to see the stories of their lives as part of the larger canvas. The close association between repressive Muslim regimes and the 'war on terror' risks thickening the belief among many Muslims that the agents of their repression are not just their local tyrants but also an 'international community' which under the leadership of the United States has become inherently anti-Islamic. Such a development would mean that Muslims would see the travails of their lives as being caused by the actions of specific governments rather than being the natural state of affairs. Thus, the interpellation of ordinary Muslims into the discourse generated by the global 'dirty war' would entail a leap from the autobiographical to the historical. Such leaps are what constitute political awareness. It is important to recall that such leaps (from the autobiographical to the historical) had in the wake of the collapse of the communism and the end of the Cold War become so difficult to make, that many commentators saw in the end of the cold war the end not only of geopolitical competition but the end of history itself. The epistemological, economic and cultural domination of (neo-)liberalism that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War sought to present, as Bauman suggests, only biographical solutions to social problems. The 'war on terror' has demonstrated that history has not come to an end under the golden arches of McWorld.

dC: While you were describing the Muslim world, it reminded me of pre-Holocaust anti-Semitism in Europe. Is that a fair comparison?

SS: I think it is a very fair comparison. Islamophobia is--like anti-Semitism was during the period from 1885 to 1945--not confined to fringe or marginal groups within society, but can be found in the banal chatter of opinion makers, as well ordinary people. Many of the themes of anti-Semitism are being re-deployed to describe Muslims, e.g. notions of dual loyalty, Muslims as threats to the integrity of Western societies… For example, the decision to introduce legislation in France banning the wearing of any religious symbols in public schools was initiated by and centered around concerns about the wearing of headscarves by Muslim girls. Much of the debate around this legislation denied all agency to Muslim women who wore the hijab, in favor, of Orientalist fantasies in which these 'dusky' maidens in distress are rescued from their plight by the French Republic's Enlightenment-armed white knights.

But I would not want to give the impression that Islamophobia is solely a European phenomenon. I think it is far more prevalent and far more institutionalized on both sides of the Atlantic than some people are prepared to recognize. It has been around in the United States for a number of years and has become increasingly widespread since 2001. It could be argued that the 'war on terror'—regardless of the protestations of innocence by its instigators—furthers this institutionalization. In the pursuit of this 'war,' governments throughout the world have been responsible not only for the erosion of civil liberties, but also for the creation of a latent moral panic which not only permits but encourages the continued expression of Islamophobia.