

Eurocentrism Through The Backdoor

Nadje S. Al-Ali

Bobby Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, Zed Books, London, 1997.

The bombings of the American embassies in Dar El Salam and Nairobi only confirmed what the British public ‘knew’ all along: Islamic fundamentalists – often simply thought of as ‘Muslims’ - are responsible for the bloodshed of innocent civilians. Subsequently, Britain, like many other European countries and North America experienced yet another series of racist outbursts equating terrorism with Islam. In light of these ongoing demonisations of Muslims and Islam, it is imperative to find forceful and creative arguments and practices to counter this increasingly widespread form of bigotry.

It is with this need and urgency in mind that I read Bobby Sayyid’s recently published book *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (1997). This certainly is not another fear-mongering sensationalist outburst about bloodthirsty Muslims. Quite the contrary. It is one of the most comprehensive attempts by a British scholar to counter negative and paranoid portrayals of Islamism.

And here perhaps some background is needed. Western depictions of ‘the East’, have often represented ‘the West’ as having exclusive property in modernity, with the effect that non-western ideas, movements, institutions and political systems (Islam among them) are inferiorized – at best that they are ‘traditional’, at worst ‘backward’ and barbaric’. It is an arrogant put-down that has become known in this academic field as ‘orientalism’. Sayyid’s project is to expose orientalism with respect to analyses of Islamism and to ‘de-centre the West’.

So far, so fair. The trouble is that Sayyid builds up Islamism as the only viable alternative to western imperialism. This is factually wrong. And it is politically dangerous –for people living in far less safe and comfortable circumstances than Sayyid. It sells out the many women and men in ‘Muslim societies’ who are not only sturdy anti-imperialists but also secular.

When I discussed Sayyid’s argument with feminists and human rights activists in Egypt, a country with growing Islamist movements, the outrage was coupled with a sense of *deja vu*. Bobby Sayyid is a sociology lecturer and the director of the Centre for the Study of Globalisation, Eurocentrism & Marginality at Manchester University. His

book drops into the midst of the political battles of the local, lived realities of these activists, wearing the dust jacket of a western publishing house. So here was another western scholar giving himself the right to decide what would classify as 'authentic' and what would be a 'western import'. To them it looked just like one more front on which they had to struggle.

Sayyid positions himself clearly outside and critical of orientalist accounts that explain the 'Muslim world' exclusively in terms of Islam, its majority religion. That is 'essentialism'. What happens next though is that he himself adopts the essentialism – although one could be forgiven for missing this because he hides it in dense postmodernist code. Islam, he says, is a 'master signifier'. And so it acquires, in his hands, an unchanging and singular essence. All sense of diversity, of historical development, goes out of the window.

And this is specially paradoxical because Sayyid says in the same breath that 'there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because the definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes'¹ (p.15). This passage occurs in that moment in the book where he takes issue with Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis for the way they use 'fundamentalism' as an analytical category in their book on women and religious fundamentalism in Britain². For Sayyid they are two more in a line of 'western feminists' who see the world through a narrow lens of self-righteousness. To anyone familiar with these authors the attack is bewildering and distressing. These are both members of a London-based group of activists and writers called *Women Against Fundamentalism* (WAF). They are a group of feminists of highly *varied* cultural, national and religious background, well known for their effective campaign against all forms of politico-religious extremism, and also their strong stand against racism, essentialism and eurocentrism. WAF have made clear from the start that they are not primarily critical of Islamic fundamentalism, but have mobilised against the oppression of women in the sexual and family politics of all forms of authoritarian patriarchal religious movements, not excluding Hinduism, Judaism and both Protestant and Catholic Christianity. It takes a good deal of inventiveness to be able, as Sayyid does, to

¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993.

² Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis 'Introduction: Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism and Women in Britain', in G. Sahgal and N. Yuval-Davis (eds.) *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, Virago, London, 1992.

misrepresent them so thoroughly as to be able to write them off as modernist, ethnocentrist and endorsing 'the homogeneity of the female subject' (p.10).

Sayyid takes issue with the use of the word 'fundamentalist' by WAF and others as a western misrepresentation of current Islamist movements. WAF for their part argue that there are similarities and connections between political religious conservative movements in these various religions and the way they operate in both western and non-western, Islamo-phobic and Islamist societies, that justify its use. Certainly, the term carries a heavy load, as the western media muddy the water by eliding Islam and fundamentalism. But when WAF uses the term 'fundamentalism' it is always made clear that it is intended in the plural, and not only Islamic fundamentalism is in question. And I would suggest that endorsing the term or looking for an alternative is perhaps less important than simply recognising (and warning) that extremist chauvinist and patriarchal movements can be found in any religion, are increasingly present in many, and that they are all damaging to women.

It is important to add that asserting continuity and connection in the way WAF does, does not necessarily suggests that coherence exists at all levels. Quite the contrary, politico-religious movements differ from one religion to another, and vary within any one of them. WAF's work has involved looking at the close detail to see just what these differences are and how they affect women.

But this is not in any case of much interest to Sayyid, who ignores the different origins of Islamist movements, their varied ideologies, strategies, organisational forms and political and economic contexts. A sketchy mention at the very end of the book, where he acknowledges that 'there are many variations in Islamism as there are Islamist movements', is clearly an afterthought. In the body of his argument, Islamism is one thing and one thing only, and its emergence has one source.

And that source is the thrust to de-centre the West. It is a mono-causal explanation, featuring purely and simply resistance to eurocentrism (p.155). Sayyid overlooks all the varied and specific social, economic and political circumstances that have contributed to the emergence of Islamism country by country. A complex phenomenon is reduced to singularity.

Sayyid does not examine in his book any actual examples of writings, speeches, pamphlets or interviews with Islamists. Nor does he probe in any depth actual Islamist politics and their concrete manifestation. He is, in fact, out of touch with local realities and material circumstances, especially those of women. Instead he bases his argument on an analysis of secondary literature, writings *about* Islamism.

One effect of this distance from lived reality is that he sometimes fails to catch the discrepancy between practice and rhetoric. For instance, Islamist Iran surprised many by endorsing a series of secularising laws and practices that were at times clearly in contradiction with the *shari'a*. Take for instance Khomeini's 1988 decree that gave Islamic government the power to 'suspend or alter any element of religious rules or worship, even prayer and fasting'.³ Sayyid simply does not detect such a gap between religious pretensions and pragmatic policies.

In representing the contemporary emergence of Islamism as nothing more than a move to 'de-centre the West' Sayyid gives overwhelming importance to 'the West' in the thinking of other regions. Islamist political actors are portrayed as merely motivated by the impetus of 'not being western' rather than acting on and reacting to other local factors such as economic and social malaise within specific countries, oppressive regimes and lack of political participation, or failures of secular ideologies, such as liberalism or socialism. The list of possible causes is long, but Sayyid dismisses various arguments as not adequately explaining why the challenge to the existing order has repeatedly and consistently taken the form of Islamic revivalism (p.5). But this is what Sami Zubaida calls reading history backwards. That is what Sayyid does: 'to ignore or dismiss the secular and secularising forces, institutions and practices in the modern history of the Middle East and the lengthy episodes in which nationalist, liberal and leftist politics dominated'.⁴

There is one instance in his book where Sayyid does look in depth at an actual historical moment in a given local context: the secularising forces and programmes in Turkey after the abolition of the caliphate under Mustapha Kemal Ataturk in 1924. Modernisation, secularisation, nationalism and westernization merged into a discourse and practice known as 'Kemalism'. Sayyid characterises Kemalism by the belief that Turkey had to emulate European culture, practices and values in order to achieve progress and 'become modern'. Islam was seen by Ataturk as a hindrance on the path to modernity. Secularisation did not stop at the separation of religion and state but included 'the liberation of the individual mind from Islamic concepts and practices' (Shaw, 1977:383; quoted in Sayyid, p.64).⁵

³ Sami Zubaida, 1993:xxiii

⁴ Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People & the State: Political Ideas & Movements in the Middle East*. I.B. Tauris, London, 1993:xiii

⁵ A consistent flaw in treatises about authoritarian regimes in Muslim societies has been the equation of increased state control over religion and religious authorities with

It is a reasoned and vivid account. But why does Sayyid choose Kemalism as though it were the only secular paradigm in the Muslim world? It was, in fact, an exception, an anomaly, not the rule. Unlike any other secular model in the Middle East and the Muslim world it was inspired by and based on the French concept of *laïcisme*. One could draw on other Arab postcolonial projects, such as socialism and Arab nationalism, where the disassociation from Islam has never been as extreme as in Kemalism. What about Nasserism, Marxism, Ba'athism and the various forms of liberalism that, while not religious, have strongly *countered* western hegemony and imperialism? By neglecting these other and varied secular trends Sayyid betrays those secular intellectuals and political activists in Muslim societies who have devoted their lives to the struggle against western hegemony.

In his discussion of Kemalism, Sayyid presupposes, first, that there is only one definition of Islam among Christians and it is orientalist; and second, that there is only one model of secularism within Christianity. In both of these things he is mistaken. He writes that 'the "Christian" (orientalist) definition of Islam removed it from the public-political domain' and that 'this notion of religion was modelled using the specific characteristics of Christianity as an exemplar' (p.64). But there was no natural and inherent link between Christianity and secularism, understood as the separation of religion and the state. This is to make Islam unique and singular. And to ignore the development of secularism in different historical contexts. And to overlook the many changing manifestations of secularism in predominantly Christian countries today.

Just how does Sayyid position himself? He is a scholar working and writing in an institution located in 'the West'. Does he acknowledge himself as part of it, or does he suppose he stands outside this context? And how does he relate to the many intellectuals and political activists who from *within* 'the West' criticise the arrogant orientalism all too common in its hegemonic discourses and in its practices? He fuses Christianity with a very particular understanding and practise of secularism. And he ignores non-Christian groups within this so-called West, including of course a growing number of Muslim minorities in Europe and North America. He forgets, besides, that political Islamic movements are not geographically limited to 'Muslim societies' outside the West but are present and vocal within it.

secularism. No doubt, Ataturk introduced secularising laws and policies, but one has to distinguish between the process of secularisation and increased state control over the religious sphere with secularism.

Sayyid's book is an exasperating read because of the way he remains locked in the very dichotomies he says he wants to deconstruct. He winds up essentializing Islamism in what is really quite an orientalist mode. And to suggest that the only thing Islamist movements respond to is 'the West' is nothing if not 'west-centred'. Once his arguments are stripped of their dense postmodernist jargon they can be seen as being just what he himself most rightly loathes: 'eurocentric'.

The book is also a dismaying read. In countries and communities with strong Islamist tendencies there are brave academics and activists (and they are often both simultaneously) who are struggling on many fronts at the same time: against authoritarian state regimes, patriarchal politics and imperialist encroachment. By his unsympathetic and superficial treatment of them Sayyid adds to the risks they take.

The secular women I studied and worked with in Egypt (and there are countless others like them all over the 'Muslim world') left me in no doubt that their political activism includes the struggle against imperialism. No way would they accept the charge that they imitate 'the West'. They point to long traditions of secular thinking within their own society. When Sayyid writes them off as selling out to 'the West', betraying 'indigenous' movements, he is doing just what he so bitterly blames others for doing. He is countering stereotypes and misconceptions current in 'the West'. But he is doing it by essentializing Islamism, failing to see diversity in it and within 'the West' and ultimately playing into the destructive process of 'othering' the other. The book leaves me with the disturbing feeling that the eurocentrism Sayyid criticises in others' work is alive and active in his own, having slipped in by the backdoor.

(2,244 Words)