EXPLAINING THE GLOBAL RELIGIOUS REVIVAL
A RESPONSE (2)

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I

Professor Asad’s presentation is a subtle and creative review of the images of Islam in the international arena and of the conjectures put forward to explain the phenomenon of religious revival in general, and in Egypt in particular. His interpretations of these phenomena introduce a significant number of categories that have historically been treated by anthropology (such as culture, ethnocentrism and identity among others). When systematically applied to specific cases, these categories can help locate in a critical and geopolitically informed position the vices that academic, political and common sense Western perspectives have constructed on Islam and on the role of religion in the Arab world. The other academic trend that has contributed to this standpoint is post-colonial critique. Professor Asad’s paper is an excellent combination of both.

II

Professor Asad’s investigation makes a welcome contribution to the literature and it reveals a healthy sense of criticism, nourished by extensive knowledge of the Arab world, its language and Islamic religion. As I regard it, this seems to apply not only to the Islamic world, but can be extended to include, among others, Chinese and Japanese traditions or the Latin American world, both of which are perceived through stereotyped forms of Orientalism and Latin Americanism. For those of us who live outside Europe or the United States, these stereotypes can be seen in many aspects, when pieces of culture—placed as if they were a homogeneous whole with an objective existence—are essentialised metonymically. This has serious consequences: the production of supposedly academic and ‘objective’ analyses generates linear, flat and generalised visions of processes such as modernity, secularisation, nationalisms, contemporary religiosity or international migrations.
The forms of interpreting Islamic religion as expounded by Prof. Asad share in my view what Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil defined as plural marks. In fact, I find great similarity between the use of the global category of ‘Indian’ as a European colonial term, which considered a collection of heterogeneous populations in North and South America as basically alike, and that of ‘Islam’ or ‘Arab’. The only thing that all the social subjects who fall into these categories seem to have in common is negative definition: being neither Western nor Christian. Could it be that old colonial eyes might be giving way to neo-colonial eyes that perceive as equal anything that is alien to their way of seeing things?

III

One of the implications of Professor Asad’s paper is that it questions the apparently universal character of the Christian-liberal view of law, democracy, freedom, morality, ethics and religion. This criticism is both possible and necessary simply because, from the viewpoint of social sciences, all these key words as commonly used in the Western world are historical artefacts, and, for that very reason, products of the contingent process of transformation of social life, and not evident abstract truths, independent of their socio-cultural contexts of origin.

This is a serious topic when values and forms of action defined by a sacred transcendent quality, as in the case of religion, are at stake. Although matters become complex, Professor Asad maintains a coherent and informed level of argument, based on his own field experience and on specialised literature. True to good anthropological tradition, in his criticism of Western ethnocentrism, he provides detailed analyses from the natives’ point of view, who make up the Egyptian national community (Islamic and secular), and who, in Western eyes, seem to be ‘exactly the same’. Likewise, he criticises what may be considered an external and superficial analysis of the emergence of religious revivalism in that country, which shares analytical commonplaces developed to study these phenomena in other regions—in other words the indigenous areas of North and South America, or Africa for that matter.

Professor Asad not only introduces us into the world of Egyptian

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