LEONARD BINDER AND THE HERMENEUTIC
OF AUTHENTICITY — CRITICAL NOTE

BY

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There is little doubt that Islamic fundamentalism is the most significant social movement in the Middle East since the advent of independent nation states in the region. Islam had once passed through a phase of modernization of religious thought in the age of liberalism. But that current trends of Fundamentalism could have a liberalist turn, is a challenging argument. Leonard Binder’s «Islamic Liberalism», purports this argument and imagines that Islamism and Liberalism should have a common future in contributing to promote a modern civil society and democracy.

At the turn of the century and in the 1930s and 40s liberalist Muslims wanted to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with the logic of science and modernity. As a result of this, Islamic reformists like Ṭāḥa Ḥusayn opted for a restrained and purely cultural role of religion, instrumental to politics and secular needs. This liberalism reflects and corresponds to secularist critiques of religion. But fundamentalism, although it reflects such critiques, aims at religious totalization of the society and votes for a symbiosis of religion, state and modern life styles. It might, therefore, well be questionable that liberalism and Islamic fundamentalism could converge to a unique project of cosmopolitanism and modernity of the Middle East.

1 The importance of the movement is well reflected in a number of influential studies, among which one might note as the most challenging ones: Gilles Kepel, Le prophète et le pharaon. Les mouvements islamistes dans l’Égypte contemporaine, Paris, La Découverte, 1984; Emanuel Sivan, Radical Islam, Medieval Theology, and Modern Politics, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985; Bruno Etienne, L’Islamisme radical, Paris, Hachette, 1987.

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This book— I am sure — will be very influential in the scholarly dialogue between Muslims and Westerners. Likewise it will be an influential source of information for any future study of Islam and modernity. Both focus and scope of «Islamic Liberalism» are drawn to replace traditional developmentalist approaches to the study of politics and culture in Peripheries and Developing Societies and to demystify conventional scripturalist approaches to the study of Islam as a high culture of the past. In considering a variety of authors of rather different stance and quality, Binder develops a challenging order of relating texts and themes to each other: thus we find Gadamer and Heidegger on hermeneutics and authenticity in a chapter on Edward Said who wanted to liberate Islamic culture from Western authenticism. He places such contrary characters like Sayyed Qutb, the Islamic romantic, and Muhammad Arkoun, the rationalist philosopher. He discussed the ideas of outspoken secularists and critics of fundamentalist authentication like Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, Tarif Khalidi and Abdallah Laroui in thematizing a «hermeneutic of authenticity» (Chapt. 8). The chapters shift between highly theoretical and objectivistic factual argumentation and between «small» philology and «grand» philosophy. At various stages of such shifts one feels insecure and worried about the possible esoterism of this book. This relates to what the author himself has called its «particularistic method», i.e. «the technique of analyzing only a few texts in great depth» and «treating each text as the creation of an individual consciousness, rather than a cultured product of a class» (p. 21).

Binder's re-writing the discourse over Islam and modernity places Ali 'Abderraziq in the centre of political philosophy, and makes Sayyid Qutb the core of modern Islamic authentication and religious aestheticism. In this attempt of re-writing the 20th century spiritual history of Islam, Binder seems to depart from two hidden while not expressis verbis stated assumptions on Islam: 1. Islamic culture in its modern continuity constitutes an undissoluble unity between the state and religion. This assumption Binder finds affirmed by Muhammad 'Imara's rejection of 'Ali 'Abderraziq's thesis of the political neutrality of Islam (Chapt. IV). 2. Islam is specific among world religions given that its «Book», the text of the Qur'an, is not mediated, but immediate divine revelation. Shrinking from any attempt of rational interpretation, it remains open to forms of aesthetic understanding. Binder focusses here on Sayyid