

A Review Essay



Defending the Current Academic Orthodoxy in Islamic Studies

A Response to Bruce Lawrence

Ali Mirsepassi

Professor of Sociology, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies New York University
am128@nyu.edu

Tadd Fernee

Lecturer, English Studies, New Bulgarian University
tfernee@hotmail.com

Upon publishing our book, we expected colleagues to perhaps challenge us and write critical reviews.¹ We wrote it with the intention of offering a critical study of the ‘new orthodoxy’ in Islamic studies, and particularly in fashionable US academic circles. However, we treated the scholars we criticized with utmost respect. We believe that our critical arguments are fair, and based on a careful reading of their works. It was sad and unexpected to read Professor Bruce Lawrence’s harshly aggressive yet complacently inattentive review of our book. Lawrence seems unhappy that our approach to Islam comes from a sociological and perhaps ‘non-believer’ perspective. His hostility, it appears, reflects personal intolerance rather than scholarly vocation. This is confirmed by the resolute refusal to analyze, even superficially, the book’s intellectual content or specific arguments. Lawrence prefers to simply smear its credibility based on innuendo and petty pretext. Without saying so directly, Lawrence employs the weight of his considerable reputation to defend the existing academic orthodoxy in contemporary Islamic studies. This orthodoxy features an

¹ Mirsepassi, Ali and Fernee, Tadd (2014). *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism: At Home and in the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

uncritical and idealized view of religion, combined with a highly critical attitude to a nebulously conceived modernity. Violence committed in the name of religion is either passed over in silence, or explained away in terms of a misreading of the holy sources. It is occasionally rationalized as a struggle of subjugated knowledge against hegemonic modernity.

We now take the time to reply to Lawrence's review of our book.² Worse than simple disagreements (which are welcome and interesting), or errors of interpretation (which are understandable), the deliberate falsifications in Lawrence's review raise serious issues of scholarly integrity. The tone is openly hostile, while refusing to discuss the book's arguments even superficially. Lawrence stridently upbraids superficial and contingent details (one incoherence in the spelling of a name, otherwise spelled uniformly across several hundred pages), while ridiculing theses that never appear in the book at all. Lawrence seems especially displeased that the book does not deal primarily with Iran since 'the authors are mostly Iranian' (Lawrence 2015: 2). Given that there are two authors, and one is Iranian, how can they be mostly Iranian? It seems that Lawrence is either making a mathematical blunder, or an unkind insinuation concerning one of the two co-authors. Given that he writes his review as if only one author exists, it must certainly be the latter.

The arrogant tone of Lawrence's review certainly drew our attention. It did not take long to see through the mask. Rather than voice the real issues which preoccupy him, Lawrence used shallow epithets like 'annoying', or a 'travesty of serious scholarship', to condemn our book (Lawrence 2015: 6). Everything Lawrence fails to say openly, however, the content of his own books makes plain. We see how our book threatened him. It classified his work within an increasingly disreputable intellectual tradition whose legacy to the 20th century has been violent political authoritarianism. This tradition is the widely influential but evermore discredited Heideggerian revolt against modernity. Lawrence assaulted our book's credibility through a barrage of innuendos. It is almost certainly because the book's critiques demolished the peg which has held aloft his main argument for years. This is the imaginary global showdown between 'modernist hegemony' and 'fundamentalism', or the relativists and the people of God. This article demonstrates how Lawrence's most revered work, behind a show of sophistication, conforms to this popular 20th century romantic template.

We are ready to discuss each point Lawrence raises. In doing so, we shall rearticulate our argument, in order to compare it with Lawrence's mythology of a clash between God and atheist material modernity.

2 Lawrence, Bruce (2015). Tracking Iranian Cosmopolitan Options, At Home and Abroad: A Review Essay of Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism. *SCTIW Review*, April. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/532>.