

**Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism
and the Limits of Modern Rationalism:
A Work of Comparative Political Theory**

Roxanne L. Euben
Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University
Press, 1999. 239 pages.

In recent months, the media has been saturated with endless discussions on Islamic fundamentalism. People with little or no training in Islamic studies have been paraded in front of viewers and readers presenting useless, and at times mindless, commentary on Islamic theology and fundamentalism.

Amid all this hyperbolic discussion, a refreshing and cogent analysis can be found in Roxanne L. Euben's excellent *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*. Euben, a Princeton Ph.D. who teaches political science at Wellesley College, offers a forceful illumination of Islamic fundamentalism, particularly the thought of Sayyid Qutb.

In this serious and intelligent work of comparative politics and political theory, Euben seeks, through an interpretive approach, to understand the

fundamentalists' own understanding of their meaning and purpose. She argues that Qutb's political thought is an indictment not only of western imperialism and colonialism, corrupt Middle Eastern governments, or modernity *per se*, "but also of modern forms of sovereignty and the western rationalist epistemology that justifies them." Euben maintains that Qutb's thought is neither unique nor idiosyncratic when compared to other Islamic fundamentalists. Yet she does not stop there – she argues that Qutb's critique of the modern condition shares many similarities with Christian fundamentalists as well, and even with neoliberal political philosophers.

By situating Qutb in a crosscultural comparative context, Euben undermines the perceived opposition between "us" and "them" or "Islam" and "the West." Instead, she maintains that Qutb and others should be viewed as part of an international thrust preoccupied with the "erosion of values, traditions, and meanings" that is seen as constitutive of post-Enlightenment modernity. Thus, Euben invites the reader to view Qutb and his theories through a critical analytical prism that is both instructive and enlightening.

Euben's book is divided into six chapters. The first two frame the general questions, define the key terms, and construct the book's methodology. It is clear that Euben is seeking to make sense, via a dense theoretical discourse, of the rise of religious fundamentalism or what she calls "foundationalist political practice." This task is problematic, she argues, given that political science no longer sees any place for metaphysics in political life. This makes it difficult to interpret practices and actions guided by belief in divine truth. Furthermore, the discipline is grounded in a *this-worldly* scholarly discourse that finds "foundationalist political practice" a threat to modern politics and hence a menace to modern society (e.g., Samuel Huntington).

Thankfully, however, Euben does not allow the vicissitudes of her own discipline to limit her investigation. In fact, she is quite determined to "make sense of the increasing power of Islamic fundamentalism in the modern world." To that end, Euben proposes a "dialogic model of interpretation" that is partly influenced by the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-George Gadamer. This model is based on hermeneutics that suggest that understanding emerges from an ongoing dialogue of "transforming and transformative discursive practices" that does not claim to be the only objective account. Rather, it carves out an "analytic space for the voices of the fundamentalists themselves" so that the participant's self-understanding becomes clearer, thereby avoiding some of the pitfalls of rationalist analyses of fundamentalism.

In the third chapter, Euben analyzes Qutb's political theory. She focuses particularly on his *Ma' alim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts along the Road). Euben presents a fairly close reading of Qutb's concept of *jahiliyah* and his views on liberty, equality, science, epistemology, gender, and race. Most of her attention, though, is devoted to his ideas on political action and the ideal state. Throughout her discussion, Euben does not try to render Qutb more palatable or rational. She points out that his political thought cannot be captured by the language of irrationalism or antimodernism. Rather, she characterizes Qutb's work as an "embrace of the nonrational" which strives, like similar movements in the West, to "reenchant a world defined by disenchantment." Understood in this way, Qutb's thought is not anti-modern, but rather an attempt to redefine what it must mean to live in the modern world.

Based on her close reading of Qutb, Euben next turns her attention in chapter 4 to such Islamic modernists as Muhammad `Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. She even includes a short coda on Khomeini and Shi'ite fundamentalism. Compared to the chapter on Qutb, this discussion is not as satisfying or original. She includes `Abduh and al-Afghani and their arguments for the compatibility of Islam and reason in order to shed light on Qutb's insistence that such arguments are false because they undermine Islamic authenticity. Although the principle purpose of this comparison is to demonstrate how Qutb is simultaneously an indictment of post-Enlightenment rationalism and modernist Islamic thought, this chapter somehow does not fall easily within her earlier discussion and theoretical framework.

Although Euben's point for this comparison (i.e., to demonstrate that Qutb's response to modernity is not the only Islamic response) is well taken, it would have been more fruitful, given the earlier theoretical sections, to focus on the discourse of fundamentalist thinkers, particularly those operating under similar economic and especially political conditions. After all, `Abduh's and al-Afghani's discourse is very much tied to the reality of the Ottoman Empire, which differs greatly from the political reality and challenges that Qutb experienced. Qutb's political diagnosis and prognosis is premised, to give one example, on the idea of the nation-state, which was not as central in the thought of `Abduh and al-Afghani.

In her final chapter, Euben offers a fascinating and, in fact, a highly unusual comparison between Qutb and such leading western intellectuals as Robert Bellah, Hannah Arendt, and Richard John Neuhaus. It is not

often that Qutb is mentioned in the same breath as these individuals! Yet Euben convincingly demonstrates that Qutb shares many similarities with them, such as their concern with the dissolution of community and the excesses of individualism, the rise of rationalism, and the loss of meaning in modern society. Although Qutb may share some of their concerns, his solutions are different. Despite some differences, Euben's overall important point is that explaining Islamic fundamentalism is not based on context-specific economic and cultural conditions, but rather should be situated within an extensive and ongoing critique of modernity and its defining processes.

Overall, this is an excellent and thoughtful analysis of Islamic fundamentalism. Even though Euben insists on what she calls an "interpretive understanding," this does not preclude her critique of Qutb. She criticizes Qutb's political thought for his insistence that the only true unity lies in Islam and his nonrecognition of the fact that his interpretation of Islam is, in fact, an act of interpretation. Euben is skeptical of universal truths in any shape or form. She is not concerned with the possible contradictions in Qutb's argument or the dangers of his political thought. Rather, she seeks to understand why fundamentalism is becoming more – rather than less – powerful by providing a "window into a world often distorted by our own cultural experiences and anxieties."

The force of Euben's book, and in my view a significant contribution not only to Middle Eastern or Islamic studies, in particular, but to political science and intellectual history in general, is that she takes fundamentalism seriously as an intellectual, religious, and political movement. She convincingly argues that Qutb should be situated in a wider transregional context because he is concerned, as are many people elsewhere, with post-Enlightenment rationalism's destructive influence and is trying to "re-enchanted" the world. She demonstrates how fundamentalists' critiques have a paradoxical relationship to modernity, "because they attempt to move beyond a modernity that is simultaneously parasitic upon it." Ultimately, the power of these ideas rests on the fact that they claim to reestablish an authentic life based on a moral unity that is appealing to many facing a fragmented and confusing world.

Magnus T. Bernhardsson
Department of History
Hofstra University
Hempstead, New York