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Richard Khoury
 Department of Islamic Studies
 University of Toronto
 Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Freedom, Modernity, and Islam

By *Richard Khoury*. London: *The Athlone Press*, 1998, pp. 384.

The ambivalent relationship between Islam and modernity is a complex and fascinating subject into which Khoury delves with a seemingly good measure of sophistication. In this book of philosophical discourse, which he presents as a work of thought and only secondarily as an historical, scholarly, or descriptive effort, Khoury seeks to articu-

late a new and creative synthesis between both historical forces that ultimately would serve to recapture the illusive spirit of freedom in the Arab Muslim world.

Khoury attributes the undermining of freedom in the Arab world to several reasons: the victory of orthodoxy and its ensuing ossification, with the result that no alternative to modernity, or even a synthesis, could be provided by Arab Muslim thinkers; the general shallowness of those who wage war against a trivialized modernity—a shallow Islam being the logical counterpart to a shallow modernism; habitual passivity in the face of despotism; and the continued insistence that Islam become intertwined with the modern state, which by its very nature and structure can only harm the implementation of Islam, at least as a project undertaken by the state (pp. xxiv-xxv, 3).

In the first chapter, Khoury argues that much of the reason behind the assault on freedom in the Arab Muslim world pertains to a vicious circle formed by the antagonism between internal and external powers acting on behalf of reductionistic views of modernity and Islam. From around the thirteenth century onward, the Muslim state was so concerned with stability and unity in the face of external threats that it precluded possibilities of doctrinal and sectarian pluralism. This condition favored a conformist orthodoxy that, by the latter part of the twentieth century, was revealed to have “undermined Islamic learning and spirituality through complacency.” Muslims awoke to a rude shock, for orthodoxy had left them ill-prepared to confront the modern assault coming in the wake of the European colonial wave. A community, after all, may rest content with its orthodoxy while remaining ignorant of other alternatives, at least until some exogenous factor intrudes.

Incapable of grasping the real foundations of the European civilization, Muslims of that time unknowingly reduced it to such visible signs as the various techniques associated with modern armies, administration, and engineering. Some Muslims turned against orthodoxy, which they blamed for the situation in which the Muslim world now found itself, and sought an alternative in a reduced and shallow modernity. Consequently, they fell easy prey to “positivism and a facile rationalism dominated by mechanism.” They espoused a shallow modernism that reflected a Western counterpart increasingly detached and disloyal to its original holism, which at one time had intertwined both rationalism and transcendence. These developments introduced a vicious circle in which shallow modernism became a natural enemy to an orthodoxy that remained in place, the latest cycle of which has taken the form of Muslim fundamentalism (pp. 2-3).

Based on this formulation of the problem of freedom in the Arab Muslim world, Khoury uses the second chapter to expose the “dual myth of sovereign reason.” He grounds his exposition on the assertion that reason cannot claim autonomy for itself, given the fact that it is always guided by something beyond it, whether moral or social ends or, within science, by thematic preferences based on aesthetic or metaphysical choices. Thus, there is no theoretical basis for claiming that modernization and rationalization are synonymous reflections of scientism, claims that when made serve to limit and reduce freedom to material and rationalized institutions. But to *rationalize* societies that continue to bear a more or less balanced view of life is to incorporate them into a global power structure that transcends boundaries and is sustained by a materialistic outlook on life. Individuals in such societies become more pliable to materialistic interests and concerns that, while possibly empowering them economically, ultimately restrict their freedom. Individual freedom is limited by suppressing whatever cannot be expressed in material terms, while collective freedom is limited by the position occupied by that particular group within the hierarchy of the global power structure.

The West's promotion of democracy and freedom, invariably undertaken within this complex framework, undermines through its very process the balance and structure of the targeted societies. Naturally, such dynamics only elicit defensive and hostile postures

from a threatened Muslim collectivity. A community that allows modest material expectations would be much less dependent, even if positioned at a lower material threshold, since it would be able to apply differentiated and resonating criteria for measuring its own worth (pp. 40-41).

With reason dislodged from its paramount position, room is made for transcendence. Chapter Three therefore incorporates the Kantian view of freedom as a model of transcendence distinct from the spatio-temporal aspects of human beings, the former being a necessary condition for expanding the domain of freedom beyond limited material considerations. He proceeds to support his argument by referring to the works of six distinguished philosophers and scholars (viz., Berque, Habermas, Broch, Reich, Bellah, and Mardin), whom he cites as theorizing authorities on the stifling material world produced by a sovereign reason. Their works, according to Khoury, offer insight and allow a better grasp of the deeper conception of modernity in the spirit of its Renaissance origins (p. xxx). They further allow, as Chapter Four shows, for drawing the important distinction between *liberation* as a reflection of negative freedom from material want and state intrusion, and *freedom* in its positive multidimensional complex. Freedom follows liberation, and is concerned with the quality and meaningfulness of the choices to be made. Khoury argues that the tendency to see both as synonymous is, therefore, misguided (p. xxxi).

While the first four chapters provide the theoretical-critical premises of the book, chapters five through seven reflect Khoury's constructive endeavor transposed into the Islamic environment. In Chapter Five, Khoury focuses on the considerable freedom he believes was traditionally available under Islam by attempting to present a strong case for Sufism through the exemplary work of al Ghazzālī and such Sufi mystics as Fakhr al Dīn 'Iraqī and Ibn 'Arabī. Defending al Ghazzālī against his critics, Khoury lauds his ability to articulate a middle ground between communal extremism and reclusive mysticism within which positive freedom could flourish at both the communal and individual levels.

In Chapter Six, Khoury argues that attacks leveled against al Ghazzālī by Adunis and others were unjustified in that much of what al Ghazzālī said pertained to a different time and conditions. In other words, he has been decontextualized and then judged by circumstances of a totally dissimilar age. Al Ghazzālī's alleged curtailment of intellectual life and willingness to extend the Qur'anic injunction regarding obeying religious and political leaders to warlords and despots, in order to preserve the unity of the community, should be seen within the context of a much weaker state. As a matter of fact, this arrangement worked fairly well given that there was room, in those times, for a religious leadership to uphold Islamic values and curb rulers' excesses if and when necessary. This Qur'anic injunction bears a totally different meaning in modern times, however, where technology exists to "visit moral, spiritual, intellectual and certainly bodily and environmental devastation upon a land" (p. 227). Under such circumstances, the Qur'anic injunction of obedience cannot be understood as a prohibition of rebellion against such devastation, for this could only be a self-undermining command. Similarly, Sufi calls for quietism must be understood within their historical contexts and not as metaphysical statements. Through such a reinterpretive effort, Khoury seeks to deflect criticism against Sufi quietism in order to proceed with his constructive framework, in which Sufism constitutes the key to freedom.

Chapter Seven concludes by offering suggestions for extending freedom on sound Islamic grounds, "informed by the need to acknowledge change, above all when historical developments have profoundly altered the import of key injunctions" (p. xxxiv). These themes are elaborated upon by referring to the constructive works of such contemporary Muslim intellectuals as M. H. Nasr, Z. Göklap, M. 'Abduh, F. Rahman, M. Arkoun, M. Iqbal, and B. S. Nursi. Through a constructive synthesis, the chapter concludes, modern

innovation and creativity would "transform Islam" (i.e., orthodoxy), while Islam would reinfuse modernity with the high moral values and spiritual impulses that were present at its origin.

Like most constructive and syncretical works, Khoury's book involves a significant level of complexity that arises from its multidisciplinary, multidimensional concerns. Methodologically, while there is merit in providing a common framework for a critical appraisal of both modernity and Islamic orthodoxy, which is understood by the reviewer to refer mainly to schools of thought or *madhāhib* (although it is not always clear whether it stops there or includes a textual and historical critique entailing the Qur'an; see for pp. 314-17), there are serious risks involved. Although he never really proclaims it outright, one can sense an underlying deconstructive streak in his work, perhaps made all the more tangible by his reference to such deconstructivist scholars as Muhammad Arkoun and to the *constructivist* efforts of other Muslim intellectuals. In fact, one senses an Arkounian influence throughout.

Deconstruction, as a method and counter-discourse, borrows from a particular heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction and delimiting of that heritage itself. While it uses the vocabulary and language of that heritage, it does so without subscribing to its premises. Given the opportunity to proceed to its logical conclusion, deconstruction would allow for the dissonant invasion of orthodoxy, which, in effect, would undermine the next-to-last bastion of historical and communal consensus among Muslims (after the Qur'an). This is not to say that much of Khoury's critique of orthodoxy's ossification and stagnation is unwarranted, but rather to highlight the risk of applying Western social theory to the Islamic system of knowledge, even and particularly through the usage of Islamic language. As a matter of fact, such subterfuge could make this approach particularly contentious. Deconstructivism is a product of a modern social theory steeped in skepticism that, when applied to modernity, inflicts no serious damage upon it. To apply it to Islam as a system of knowledge anchored in certitude, however, is to commit an act of violence and aggression. In other words, to use modernity's own standards to critique it from within and then uphold this position to justify applying modernity's critical methodology against Islam from without, and then to make a claim to *procedural* fairness represents an ideological stance that camouflages *substantive* violence against Islam. Khoury's work tends to reflect such a condition, although in a very subtle fashion, which threatens to reduce his study to an ideological manifestation of a false consciousness.

The first part of this book gives a strong impression of defending Islam, religiosity, and transcendence—perhaps out of the author's convictions, or perhaps so that the reader may lower his or her guard. Khoury actually is quite explicit that Islam would be better off if it relaxed its defensive and guarded posture (p. xxxvi). This seems necessary to allow for the deconstructivist goal of dismantling perceived metaphysical and rhetorical structures at work in the privileged concept, in this case orthodoxy, not necessarily to reject or discard it, but to reinscribe and reorder it in another way. While not an illegitimate task in itself, one should not lose sight of the fact that orthodoxy, despite its shortcomings, succeeded in the most important task of preserving the *form* and *content* of the Islamic faith, though perhaps not its dynamism. Any alternative reinscription seeking to reinstate the latter element must establish, as a precondition, the standards and criteria of maintaining the former aspects. In other words, Islamic thought must learn to fly again in addition to always knowing where to land. This should not be understood as a reflection of conservatism or risk aversion, but as a strategic precaution, given that the globalization and Americanization of the world may not allow orthodoxy the necessary autonomy or space to tinker and experiment. Thus, while Khoury may uphold Islamic form throughout his book, he seems to have done less well as far as content is concerned.

In his reinscription, Khoury presents three fundamental and interrelated arguments. The first is that Sufism constitutes a still untapped source of Islamic thought and a major component of a heritage that historically has given freedom in Islam its fullest expression (p. 195). A rehabilitated Sufism not only would contribute immensely to personal and communal freedoms, but also to inner spiritual growth, which is now stifled by orthodoxy. This would allow for the creation of an Islamic condition based on Islamic social relations and institutions. This condition, which brings us to his second major point, does not extend to politics and the state. Rather, it would allow for the peaceful and gradual formation of informal alternatives to the state, which in its modern shape (according to Khoury) cannot demand obedience in accordance with Qur'anic injunctions. Thus, while Sufism would be a source of opposition to tyrannical and corrupt regimes through the horizons of the negative and positive freedoms that it propels, it would serve as a simultaneous guarantee that such opposition would not spill over into the religio-political arena.

Khoury also maintains that any attempt to Islamize the modern state would prove disastrous and even impossible for Islam, "not because Islam is no longer a religion and a state in the absolute, but" as he put it adopting a semiotic logic, "because the meaning of 'state' has changed beyond recognition since the days of Revelation" (p. 281). To neutralize any possible defensive postures, this point is introduced as a problem not with Islam but with modern constructs. The power of the modern state, as a result of technological advancements and by its very structure and mechanisms, has become so immense that an Islam inevitably corrupted by the requirements of statecraft and politics could inflict tremendous harm on society and the cause of freedom. In practice, therefore, the outcome should be a secular state in outlook, but one that respects Islamic sensibilities.

The third point that Khoury makes presents Turkey as a relatively successful Islamic model. In a subtly introduced point, he states that because republican Turkey has held several open elections in the last four decades, "obedience to the state entails the freedom to vote the opposition into office. Obedience is transferred gradually to rules rather than rulers" (p. 240). Essentially "obedience today ... in the best interests of the Muslim community ... means obedience to the rules governing functions of states that allow a congenial environment for Islamic expression" (p. 241).

A broader picture emerges from these three points. Khoury rarely uses the term *secular democracy*, and never in the context of advocacy (for instance, he states that the framework for political freedom need not replicate liberal democratic thought [p. 281]), perhaps to avoid using a buzzword that would elicit a defensive posture among Muslims. However, it seems fairly clear that he attempts to transpose democracy into Islam, where the latter simply becomes a form. What we have here instead are the components and mechanisms of liberal democracy as content: a Sufism concerned mainly with expanding the inward horizons of spirituality (privatization of faith with elements of popular will, and opposition to pluralistic inclinations); a secular state presented as being in the best interest of Islam; and party structures and procedures that vote political parties in and out of office (notwithstanding the recent experience of the Islamic Refah party in Turkey with the military). Islam thus becomes subject to secular liberal democratic voting rules in the manner of the Christian Democrats of Europe. If Islam has proven itself to be immune to secularism, it might as well be Christianized and render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Whatever the case, it cannot be true to itself if the cause of freedom is to be enhanced. Islam has to be qualified by a liberal or democratic content colored by a spiritual veneer.

Khoury's assertion that the modern state cannot be Islamized further adopts the metaphysical language of inevitabilities and determinisms, which empirical observations have shown collapse, frequently and eventually, into mere spatio-temporal assumptions.

Notwithstanding the difficulties and problems that a modern state structure may pose for Islam, one should not lose sight of how Western social theory elevated the belief in human society's inevitable progression away from religious convictions toward secularism to the level of dogma. This whole intellectual edifice was shaken to its foundations with the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran. One can actually argue that the Islamic revolution owed much of its success, structurally speaking, to the very modern state that Khoury has stated is at odds with Islam. His logic does not seem to be corroborated by experience.

Missing from his synthetical project, furthermore, is any discussion on how Muslims could transcend the modern state and progress toward the creation of the necessary coercive apparatus (the shield) that can confront domestic and external threats as orthodoxy changes, and without which no value system could thrive or feel secure. If the state were to define Islam as a core value to be defended and/or promulgated in the same fashion that Western countries do with respect to democratic values, would not this state have to link Islam to politico-strategic interests and therefore become Islamized? Could it credibly do so while upholding secular values? If, however, Islam is a core value of the society but not of the state, would such a condition be legitimate or stable? And if Islam could be corrupted by state imperatives (Khoury again adopts a metaphysical position regarding such an outcome), is this a good enough reason to cease pursuing the Islamic ideal in politics? Would not this be akin to those simplistic arguments that sought an end to human conflict by abolishing private property? Could not one adopt this same logic to argue for dismantling the secular liberal democratic state, which continues to produce the technological gadgets that have rained down so much destruction on humanity? Or is it a case where Islam has to pay for Western technological recklessness in the same fashion that Arabs/Muslims had to pay in land and blood for crimes perpetrated in Europe?

These unanswered questions and errors of omission significantly weaken Khoury's project. By excluding the "Islamic state," he fails to close the synthetical circle. Khoury's book must be read with great care, not only because it raises important and valid issues of concern, but also because it is a sample of the upcoming subtler waves of Western social theory and Orientalism as they incessantly continue to deal with Islam and the Muslim world.

Amr G. E. Sabet
Department of Political Science
University of Tampere
Tampere, Finland