

Islam, The Future of Tradition between Revolution and Westernization'



Charles Saint-Prot

ISLAM

THE FUTURE OF THE TRADITION:
BETWEEN REVOLUTION AND WESTERNIZATION



Charles Saint-Prot's latest book, "Islam: The Future of Tradition between Revolution and Westernization," was originally written in French where it generated much attention. It also generated attention in Saudi Arabia where the King Abdulaziz Public Library oversaw its translation into English and Arabic.

The interest stems from both the nature of the topic and the author's objective and unbiased approach. Saint-Prot, a historian specializing in international relations, particularly, in questions of the Middle East and the Islamic world, is the director of the Observatoire d'Etudes Geopolitiques (Observatory of Geopolitical Studies) in Paris. Author of about 30 publications, he also teaches at the Faculty of Law at Paris Descartes University, the University of Strasbourg in France and at the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona, Spain.

In this book, Saint-Prot presents a history of Muslim thought in the light of the orthodox tradition or salafism, from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to our modern world. The author has the knack not only to explain and summarize a complex topic with remarkable clarity but also to make it interesting to read.

This study is based on the belief that Islam is a religion built on the fundamental principle of reform. "Islam. The Future of Tradition between Revolution and Westernization" constitutes a formidable response to anyone calling for "modernizing Islam."

"The call for modernizing Islam is essentially and implicitly aimed at instilling the materialistic consumer values into the system of Islam, by giving utmost importance to profit, consumption, and individualism, as well as other materialistic values, above the spiritual values. I believe, therefore, that such calls are fallacious calls meant to strip Islam of its spiritual character and lead it to follow the materialistic deviations of liberalism that ultimately lead us to ruin and meaninglessness," writes Saint-Prot.

The author shows Islam's inherent ability to undergo changes and face social and economic challenges because it is a religion based on the principle of continuous reform. The effort of interpretation known as "ijtihad" is at the heart of the reform mechanism in Islam.

The requirement for "ijtihad" was clearly made by Taki Al Din Ahmed Ibn Taymiya (1263-1328) who

has been, along with Sheikh Abdul Wahab (1703-1792) a victim of a disinformation campaign, which gave rise to “the myth of an extremist.” An objective study of their work highlights the important role they both played in the reformist movement. Even today, their thoughts are particularly relevant. It is interesting to read what Ibn Taymiya wrote some eight centuries ago:

“Much of the misunderstanding that arises between people is due to newly invented, ambiguous words, used with different meanings by different people. In these circumstances, it is important to avoid vague terms and to use ones, which are simple and clear. Any term, which has two meanings, affecting truth and falsehood, should not be used unless it is accompanied by other explanatory terms, which are clear and precise and express the intended meaning effectively. The differences that arise between sensible people mostly arise from the use of terms which bear several meanings or are poorly defined, and the disputes that occur between people are due to the use of vague terms.” This is especially true today where much of the present misunderstanding is due to the constant misuse of words in the media, like “Islamism” and “fundamentalism,” which people mistake for revolutionary movements.

One of the major threats facing Muslims is the belief that they can only be modernized if they accept the Western model and create a so called “enlightened Islam” in order to face new economic, political and cultural challenges. Many people in the West tend to divide Islam into two camps: an acceptable Islam where religion is reduced to a minimum “and a bad Islam — that of Osama Bin Laden and the terrorists.

According to Laurence Pintak, the American policy makers need an adversary they can stigmatize in order to maintain an atmosphere of tension. The war on terrorism was the perfect pretext to mount a media campaign against the Muslim world, known as the “green peril,” which has replaced the communist threat or “red peril.”

Andre Miquel, the well-known French Arabist remarks how Islam has managed better than other religions to embody a civilization as well as evoke spirituality. Islam is a complete way of life, which is seriously challenged in our modern secularized societies.

The Muslim world must discover its own path toward modernity within the Islamic jurisprudence. There is a dire need for new reformist thinkers who can revive the practice of “ijtihad,” the effort of interpretation to revive the inspiration and energy at the core of Islam’s dynamic nature. Far from being a threat, Islam on the contrary, contains moral values which the West, “in its frenzied pursuit of secularism, has lost sight of.”

In the last pages, the author strongly reminds us that the genocide of the Armenians, carried out by the secular regime of the Young Turks, (in contrast to the tolerance traditionally shown by Islam and the Ottoman Empire), the massacres committed by the communist regimes, the two million Iraqis who suffered from the US embargo and the million Afghans who died during the Soviet invasion were the result of secularist regimes.

At the end of an extraordinary meeting between Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah and the Pope, the king stated that “it is not the time for religions to fight one another; it is time for them to fight together against the decline of moral and spiritual values, against materialism and against excessive individualism.”

“Islam. The Future of Tradition between Revolution and Westernization” sheds the truth on a topic widely misunderstood, but which is gaining momentum. An increasing number of Muslims are now yearning for a modern and moderate interpretation of Islam that can be true to the basic values and principles of the Qur’an and the Sunnah, yet also address the changing needs and priorities of Muslim societies in the 21st century.

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