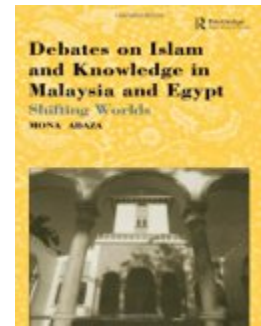


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mona Abaza. *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt: Shifting Worlds*. London: Routledge, 2002. xix + 304 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7007-1505-3.

Reviewed by Farish A. Noor (Centre for Modern Orient Studies, Berlin)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (August, 2003)



Politics, Power, and Knowledge: Revisiting the Islamization of Knowledge Project

Politics, Power, and Knowledge: Revisiting the Islamization of Knowledge Project

Written by Mona Abaza, *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt: Shifting Worlds* is an important book which tries to link together the intellectual, ideological, and political developments in two Muslim-majority countries—Egypt and Malaysia—over the past three decades and to explore the hidden undercurrents of intellectual-political life in both countries. The work focuses on the development of Islamic intellectual and academic thought that has taken on a life of its own and followed a number of different trajectories following the landmark international conference on Muslim education that was held in Mecca in 1977, and Prof. Ismail Raj Faruqi’s clarion call for Muslim scholars, *Ulama*, and intellectuals to take up the task of reconstructing the order of knowledge on terms that were fundamentally Islamic, more culturally authentic, and directly relevant to the needs of contemporary Muslims the world over (pp. 9, 23-24).

At the root of the project Abaza identifies the crisis of confidence and intellectual dependency that had taken root in the collective Muslim psyche and the reaction of a whole generation of post-colonial Muslim intellectuals and political elites to the enduring dominance and hegemony of the West over the rest. She locates the Islamization of knowledge project within the historical parameters of the post-colonial era, tracing its linkages and similarities with other Third-Worldist trends that were en vogue at the time, including the Africanist “negritude”

movement, the emergence of subaltern studies in the Indian subcontinent, the calls for cultural particularism in the West, and the (much later) development of the “Asian values” school of thought in Southeast and East Asia.

What unites these intellectual movements was and is the growing awareness that “knowledge” is not neutral, objective, nor as universal as some of its Western proponents claim it to be, but that what now passes as universal knowledge based on immutable scientific and empirical premises has itself been put through the sieve and prism of the occidental eye which invariably frames the world from its own distinct cultural, historical, and secular-universal perspective. Seen thus the Islamization of knowledge project comes across as the Muslim world’s response to the intellectual and epistemological hegemony of the West, by coming up with an alternative order of knowledge and power that is nonetheless caught in an oppositional dialectics with the Other.

Working on such familiar Foucauldian premises, Abaza attempts to explain as well as deconstruct the workings of the Islamization of knowledge project, attempting to unearth its internal mechanisms as well as some of its more obvious contradictions and blind spots. *Debates on Islam and Knowledge* thus reads as a sustained attempt at an archaeology and deconstruction of a vast intellectual program that was itself meant to be an archaeology of sorts: Abaza offers us a book that is basically a history of ideas, and one that tries to identify the evolution of this body of ideas within the wider socio-cultural and political currents of the societies that became

the hosts and benefactors of that project.

Though critical of the project as a whole, Abaza accepts the validity of the angst and anxieties of that generation of Muslim intellectuals who saw the need for a reconstruction of knowledge that would free epistemology, philosophy, and the sciences of their unstated Eurocentric and Orientalist biases. The problem, however, is what had to be done after stating the obvious: while acknowledging knowledge's intimate linkages to Western power, force, and domination, how then does one attempt to construct an alternative system that is at the same time authentic, culturally specific, and universal?

Abaza's concern is not only to analyze the phenomenon of Islamization of knowledge itself, but also to identify the key actors and agents involved, and to trace the manifold ways and means through which the project was later taken up by Islamist intellectuals, scholars, organizations, think-tanks, and governments in the Muslim world. She begins with the rudimentary question of whether it is possible to Islamize knowledge (or for that matter Hinduize or Christianize knowledge) in the first place (p. 1). Herself admittedly skeptical of the project, Abaza begins her analysis by noting the paucity of material and the overall low quality of academic output that has come from the proponents of the project thus far:

"Their [the Islamizers] contribution has left a lot to be desired. I recall wandering between the passages of the International Islamic University of Kuala Lumpur having the sentiment that this institution was a nest breeding a tense social domination. Body language, dress, religious gestures and inflated ceremonial performances were enhanced on the front stage at the expense of genuine intellectualism. In my encounters and meetings with officials and academics in Kuala Lumpur I was struck more by the concern for habitus and ceremony than the substance of what was being said." (pp. 2-3)

This disproportionate concern for appearances and the superficial comes out clearly in her critical observations of the offices of the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT) in Cairo as well as the vainglorious edifice of the Institute for Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur. (chaps. 3, 4, and 6; also pp. 88-95, 143-145). Linked to this are her own concerns that the Islamization of knowledge project may have gone off the rails for a number of important reasons that she herself outlines repeatedly in the book.

First, as Abaza demonstrates in her chapters on the Malaysian experience, the Islamization of knowledge

project was hostage to the needs and vicissitudes of realpolitik and the political machinations of statist elites and politicians who saw in it a convenient vehicle to enhance their own Islamic credentials by sponsoring ostensibly "Islamic" educational initiatives in order to boost their own waning Islamic credibility. The Malaysian government's patronage of Syed Naquib al-Attas and ISTAC was, in her view, a case of "the 'refeudalization' and institutionalisation of an Islam of power" that served the interests of the ruling elite (pp. 89, 92-95, 105). Through a close reading of some of Naquib al-Attas's texts, she notes that his was a view of Islamic knowledge that was firmly rooted in a neo-Sufistic understanding of social strata and hierarchies (pp. 92-93), deeply enmeshed within a culture of patronage and power (pp. 104-105) that suited the interests of the modernizing authoritarian political leadership of Malaysia, then under the guidance of the Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed and his erstwhile deputy Anwar Ibrahim.

This culture of dependency on political patronage and support in turn contributed to the paradoxes that were faced by these aspiring pioneers of the Islamization of knowledge project (pp. 218-225). Themselves a liminal community that straddled both the world of Islamic tradition and that of Western secular sciences, these Islamizers were caught between traditional religious scholars and the modernizing secular elites of their own countries. Their lack of organic linkages and support, and the absence of a mass-based popular public following, made them hostages to political interests which in turn distorted their images in public and invariably affected the quality and content of their work as well. Again, Abaza's critical account of the goings-on at Malaysia's ISTAC are instructive. Noting that this grandiose "castle built on sand" was built in the form of an enormous (not to forget expensive) fortress "that was not in Malaysia but could be somewhere in the Middle East" (p. 88), Abaza points to the alienation and isolation of such endeavors and their proponents.

But here lies the fundamental weakness and contradiction of the whole Islamization of knowledge project itself. Dependent as it was on state patronage and support, institutions such as ISTAC and the International Islamic University (IIU) of Malaysia and the IIIT of Egypt were hardly able to bring about a paradigm shift in thinking on a public scale. What is more, as Abaza points out in her analysis, such proximity to power and privilege soon earned these Muslim scholars and intellectuals the charge that they were merely working for the government and helping to prop up the ailing regimes whose

legitimacy and Islamic credibility were long spent. (The same criticism has been levelled at the so-called “Muslim media,” which, in most cases, has turned out to be nothing more than the propaganda arms of the Muslim governments they work for.) Compared to more “authentic” grass-roots Islamist movements and parties like the Ikhwan’ul Muslimin of Egypt and ABIM and PAS of Malaysia, these institutions had little effect on the popular understanding and expression of normative Islam in their own societies.

This sense of relative isolation and alienation in turn explains some of the internal disputes and constant internecine struggles among the Muslim scholars themselves. In her analysis of the developments in Egypt (chaps. 9, 10) and Malaysia, Abaza notes that these proponents of Islamization of knowledge were not able to get as far for the simple reason that they were at odds with themselves most of the time. Like the impotent aristocrats who were forced to engage in petty duels and back-biting at the court of the French King Louis XIV, the present generation of Muslim scholars and intellectuals who have been patronized by their own Muslim rulers and politicians have been engaged in a pitiful and fruitless contest for favors and state support for years. This, in part, explains the bitter diatribes, personal attacks, and slander that have been meted out to the Islamizers by their own ilk over the years, symptoms of an intellectual culture that has become inbred and incestuous for too long.

In all these cases Abaza’s critical assessment is based on a structural analysis that looks more at the structures of power, control, and domination—as well as the mechanisms for the construction and production of knowledge—rather than at the contents of the discourse itself. The book, as I have pointed out, is more a study of the politics of knowledge-production than an overview of the contents of the discourse itself. For those interested in the processes of knowledge-production, reproduction, and dissemination, this is a useful study indeed.

Abaza’s book remains an important contribution to the study of the Islamization of knowledge project and its strength lies in its comparative approach as the author tries to connect the seemingly disparate and unrelated developments in different localities within a broader context of global Islamic intellectual revivalism. One can only hope that such an endeavor will be taken up by other scholars who will expand the author’s parameters of research both geographically and historically, drawing out the chains and connections of continuity and difference

within contemporary Muslim society so that a larger picture can emerge, one that charts the co-ordinates of the intellectual habitus of Muslims worldwide and which maps out the parameters of Muslim thought over time and space.

The problems with the book, however, have more to do with its structure and focus than with its immediate contents.

For a start, the reader is often left with no clue as to where the focus of the work should be. Abaza darts back and forth between the two poles of her research and this initially gives the impression that her studies of the Egyptian and Malaysian scenes are meant to complement and mirror each other. But no such mirroring effect takes place, and this in turn robs the work of its comparative weight and analysis. Chapter 9, which looks at the Islamization of knowledge debate in Egypt, for instance, reads as a well-thought out cursory observation on the state of the art of Islamic thinking in Egypt. Abaza is on familiar territory here and she delves deeply into the complexities of the debate and its historical antecedents, pointing to the clashes of ideas and personalities such as Abdel Wahhab al-Messiri, Nasr M. Arif, Muhammad ’Immara, Tareq al-Bashri, and Nasr Abu Zayd. Abaza also considers how the debate in Egypt has fallen back on long-established historical antecedents and tradition, bringing to the foreground the ideas and works of Muslim thinkers like Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Rushd, whose own contributions to Muslim thought have become part of the (often bitter and acrimonious) debate between the various schools of Islamic thought.

Yet one would have hoped that chapter 9 would be followed by a chapter that attempts to give a similar overview of the state of Muslim intellectual thought in Malaysia. This, however, does not materialize and one is left with the distinct impression that either such an equivalent debate does not exist in Malaysia (which is patently not the case) or that chapter 9 should be read independently.

Which bring us to the next observation about the book. Read independently, the various chapters come across as curious and highly informative vignettes about individual personalities, organizations, and currents of thought in the respective countries. The chapters on Ismail Raj Faruqi, Syed Naquib al-Attas, Henry Corbin, and Syed Hussein Alatas read as detailed character studies that could have been published and read on their own, as short monographs or biographical papers that sum up the works and ideas of the thinkers in question (though the

chapter on Henry Corbin remains less developed compared to the rest).

Put together, however, the four chapters that make up the second part of the book seem to lack the thin red line of tight argumentation that could have linked them together to form part of a broader argument. If Abaza's aim was to give a general overview of the internal debates and internal differences between these different thinkers and the effect they had on each other's work, this does not come out clearly in the text. While she does attempt several cross-references in each individual chapter, a broader meta-narrative does not emerge from the text to unite them, leaving the chapters to stand alone as it were as an assembly of shorter intellectual portraits of Islamizers in their own time and space. It is amazing to note that while she mentions time and again that the two brothers Syed Naquib al-Attas and Syed Hussein Alatas have been diametrically opposed to each others' work and ideas, there is no attempt to develop this into a theme in itself, or to explore the ways and means that the interaction between these different ideas and schools of thought were part of a bigger ideological struggle for the hearts and minds of Muslims in Malaysia then.

Writing as a political scientist, my own interest has been to see how the Islamization of knowledge project was taken captive by the interests of politics and politicians. When Abaza discusses the issues at stake (chap. 2), her analysis comes closest to that of conventional political economy. Here is where her disparaging accounts of the apparent drawbacks and failures of the Islamization of knowledge project seem most cogent and acceptable. When looking at the Malaysian case, for instance, she notes that the Malaysian state's patronage of institutions like ISTAC and IIU had as much to do with the basic political prerogative of giving jobs to Muslims and keeping unemployment levels down (pp. 33-38). Likewise similar observations are made for Egypt and Malaysia when Abaza notes that the state's support of such initiatives was motivated by the primordial needs of political survival above all else, and what mattered most was trying to maintain control and support of the Muslim vote bank. But these analyses could and should have been pushed further, though the book takes us on many an unwarranted (and irrelevant) digression that could have been edited out in the long run.

On the whole, this will not be an easy book to digest by those in favour or supportive of the Islamization of knowledge project. Some of Abaza's observations may seem caustic and acerbic, and there is the tendency to

over-generalize. The fundamental question that she set out to answer—whether knowledge could be Islamized—remains unanswered. More charitable observers who have been supportive of such Third-Worldist endeavors might argue that it is still too early to judge and that the long march towards a world of multiple universalisms is far from over.

But reading the book in the light of recent developments post-September 11, 2001, merely confirms our belief that whatever may be the case, Western (and particularly American) hegemony and power are painful realities that cannot be avoided. With the growing assertion of Western military and political might, the Eurocentric and Orientalist order of knowledge and power has become consolidated and more powerful than ever, to the point where the mere mention of the word "Islam" conjures up negative images and stereotypes of Muslims for many people in the world. So great is the power and attraction of the Western epistemological register that one might be forgiven for thinking that it is the only worldview that exists, and that the "truths" of the West are the only ones that are valid and relevant for the times we live in.

Today, as we watch the inexorable march of the American hegemon and its relentless quest to impress its stamp of power and authority on the rest of the globe, one is thankful for the existence of some quarters of resistance at least, futile and pathetic though their resistance may have been so far. What is clear is that in the face of growing Western triumphalism and unilateralism, there is a pressing need for an alternative worldview, or a multiplicity of alternative worldviews, that would challenge the false certainties of George Bush and the warmongers of the White House. While it is true that the proponents of the Islamization of knowledge project have themselves been caught in the vise of power and politics, there remains the need to free knowledge from the shackles of simplistic ideology, crass consumerism, and an unrestrained militarism.

Those who support the Islamization of knowledge project (along with those who have supported other Third-Worldist intellectual endeavors) should read the book and take some of the criticisms to heart, painful though they may be to swallow at first. The Muslim world has been fed empty slogans for too long and the landscape of the Muslim world is already cluttered with too many posh and expensive ivory towers and institutes of research that have produced meager results. Rather than playing to the gallery or falling victim to the

whims of their politicians, Muslim intellectuals, *Ulama*, and scholars today need to work even harder to come up with a progressive, dynamic, and effective discourse of Islamism that will finally serve as a genuine challenge and alternative to the neo-imperialist discourse of liberal-capitalism that is being forced down our throats at the point of a gun.

Note

Dr. Farish Ahmad-Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist currently working at the Centre for Modern Orient Studies (ZMO), Berlin. He is the author of *New Voices of Islam* (Leiden: ISIM, 2002), *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern Histories* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish, 2002), and *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, 1951-2003* (Kuala Lumpur: MSRI, 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Farish A. Noor. Review of Abaza, Mona, *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt: Shifting Worlds*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8049>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.