Walaa Quisay, *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodoxy, Spirituality and Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. x, 332 pp., ISBN 978-1-399-50277-1.

During a stay in Jordan in the summer of 2013, I met the prominent Jordanian theologian Saʿīd Fūda. We engaged in a conversation about the scholar Ibn Taymiyya and quickly realized that we held different opinions. We agreed to continue the discussion in Fūda’s office the next day. However, things did not go as planned. When I entered his office, three young men were already present, who clearly held Fūda in high esteem and were possibly his students. One of them asked Fūda for his opinion on the Egyptian military leader, ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī, and the coup led by him against the government of Muḥammad Mursī. As far as I remember, the Rābiʿa [Rabaa] Massacre was not brought up, so I guess the conversation took place before it. Fūda began praising al-Sīsī and the military coup, which initially astonished the three young men. At first, they endeavoured to raise questions and objections but, as the discussion advanced, they increasingly began to empathize with Fūda’s perspective. The topic dominated the rest of the encounter, which I mostly observed in silence, learning more from this episode than I would have in a discussion with Fūda about Ibn Taymiyya. Reading Walaa Quisay’s book *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodoxy, Spirituality and Politics* not only reminded me of this encounter, but also shed further light on it.

Before delving into the content of the book, a few words about the impressive cover need to be said: It is reminiscent of Ottoman miniature painting and captivatingly illustrates the book’s content. While reading the book, it is worth taking an occasional look at the cover and attempting to decipher its meaning.

Quisay’s book explores the historical genesis and intellectual development of a particularly influential movement in the West, which she refers to as neo-traditionalism. She primarily focuses on three leading figures of this movement: Hamza Yusuf, Abdal Hakim Murad, and Umar Faruq ʿAbdallah (hereafter referred to as “the shaykhs”). Additionally, she examines the followers of these scholars, referred to as “seekers of sacred knowledge” or simply “seekers.” Between 2015 and 2021, Quisay conducted interviews with 40 “seekers” aged between 18 and 34 and participated in spiritual retreats known as *riḥla*s in England and Malaysia.

I will start by highlighting the key features of neo-traditionalist Islam as presented by Quisay. Of particular importance is the famous triad of *islām*, *īmān* and *iḥsān*, which is correlated with the triad of law (*fiqh*), theology (*kalām*) and mysticism (*taṣawwuf*). In its orthodox forms, these disciplines are represented by the four well-known schools of *fiqh*, the two *kalām* schools called Ashʿariyya and Māturīdiyya, as well as scholars of *taṣawwuf* such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240). But to really understand neo-traditionalism, one has to look at the grand narrative that lies at its heart. According to this narrative, pre-modern societies were aware that truths, social hierarchies, and moral values are rooted in the metaphysical structures of the cosmos. Inspired by anti-modernist thinkers of Catholic origin, neo-traditionalism constructs a history of decline in which the Reformation, Enlightenment, secularism, and postmodernity act as driving forces. Anti-metaphysical modernity, which represents the defining Other of neo-traditionalism, largely holds the Islamic world in its grip. Symptomatic of this is the emergence of Salafism and Islamism. Only in a few strongholds has authentic Islam managed to survive. Through the traditional *ijāza* system, which is of great importance in neo-traditionalism, the sacred knowledge of the Muslim saints residing in these strongholds made its way to Europe, where it is now embodied in a series of (typically) white, male converts. The significance of the role of Western converts arises not least from the fact that the vast majority of Muslims in the Islamic world (including those who migrated to the West) have been influenced by modernity in such a profound way that they can no longer find their way to pristine Islam on their own. Pristine Islam, in its essence, represents a path to recognize, affirm, and align life with the hierarchical structures of the cosmos.

It should come as little surprise that neo-traditionalism has no or very limited affinities with the political left or with decolonial/postcolonial movements. What they all share is the denial of societal hierarchies that are rooted in the metaphysical structure of reality. Rather, they dismiss such a view as an instrument to legitimize abuse and exploitation. From the perspective of neo-traditionalism, however, the denial of these metaphysically underpinned hierarchies leads to more chaos and destruction than an affirmation of these hierarchies entails. Additionally, neo-traditionalism considers the worldly realm a place necessarily permeated by evil. Compared to the infinite justice realised in the hereafter, the evil of the temporal world is, however, either negligible or, at least, bearable.

It is, in fact, the political right and conservative elements within Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism that neo-traditionalists sympathize with. The specific manifestations of these sympathies are noteworthy. For example, the ardent fascist and racist Julius Evola (d. 1974), who migrated to Nazi Germany after the fall of fascist Italy in 1943, is considered an inspiring source for criticism of modernity by Abdal Hakim Murad, albeit with reservations. Hamza Yusuf’s role as an advisor to the governments of Bush and Trump, as well as his collaboration with individuals from the (even Islamophobic) right-wing and/or evangelical directions further illustrate these sympathies.

For neo-traditionalists, returning to the enchanted world of the pre-modern era means, borrowing an expression from Murad’s latest book title, “travelling home”. One means to achieve this is through the above-mentioned spiritual retreats, which preferably take place at traditionally significant locations such as Turkey, Spain, or Malaysia. During these multi-day retreats, the seekers follow a tight schedule that allows little room for sleep or social interaction while attentively listening to the teachings of the shaykhs. The quotes from interviews with the seekers cited by Quisay demonstrate that they make a heterogeneous group. However, what unites them is their sense of alienation triggered by modernity, which they try to combat through a stronger dedication to Islam.

Quisay extensively examines how, during the retreat, the structures of plausibility of the outside world are suspended or weakened. As an example, she cites the statement of a female seeker who mentions that a teacher during the retreat recommended supplicating for the guidance of Trump and Netanyahu as a strategy to combat injustice. While this appeared plausible to the seeker during the retreat, she later began to question its validity. This shift in the conditions of plausibility can be explained, among other factors, by the rigid hierarchical divisions between shaykhs and seekers, which offer little room for critical questioning. Additionally, there exists a culture of idolization of the shaykhs, with some participants believing that they possess superhuman abilities. For example, some identify Umar Abdallah, who is considered the most spiritual of the three shaykhs, with the Qurʾānic figure Khiḍr. Other seekers believe that Hamza Yusuf can read minds. One seeker comments on this by saying: “He [Yusuf] doesn’t promote it, but the culture around him is very broken” (p. 115).

This shows that the idolization of the shaykhs does not mean that seekers are incapable of maintaining a critical distance from their teachers or even separating themselves from them. Hamza Yusuf’s political viewpoints especially have been and still are the subject of controversies. These encompass his offensive comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement (for which Yusuf later issued an apology) and his unwavering support for various rulers in the Islamic world, notably those of the Emirates. They also include his statement about the Syrian Revolution that, among other things, God had humiliated the Syrian people due to their mistreatment of their leader, a statement for which, once again, Yusuf later expressed regret. He advocates a seeming political quietism with a special affinity for monarchy: “Kings are not hungry. They have everything, so they do not need anything” (cited by Quisay on p. 138). Yusuf’s ongoing entanglements with political leaders around the world, which stand in contrast to the quietism he advocates for his followers, are not only viewed critically by some of the seekers, but also by Abdal Hakim Murad, though only implicitly, since he does not mention Yusuf by name in his criticism. On the other hand, there are also seekers who either fully embrace Yusuf’s perspectives or justify them by suggesting that he may possess background information they lack.

In the concluding chapter, Quisay poses a question that lurks behind the whole book: “Are the shaykhs telling an objective story, or misplacing a set of white anxieties—born of a civilizational narrative—and presenting them as axiomatic and more rooted?” The book clearly advocates for the latter view and endeavours to demonstrate that the ostensibly anti-modern stance of neo-traditionalism is not firmly grounded in unchangeable metaphysical principles. Instead, it is moulded by very specific political circumstances and power-driven interests or, to put it more generally, is profoundly shaped by the conditions of modernity and is, therefore, a very modern phenomenon itself. The narrative of bastions in the Islamic world supposedly untouched by modernity, such as Mauritania), also aligns more with Orientalist stereotypes than with reality.

While this is clearly a fascinating book on neo-traditionalism, some weaknesses need to be pointed out. One notable one is Quisay’s lack of self-positioning within the existing research on neo-traditionalism. She is not the first to contribute on this topic and the book would have been more interesting if she had shown how it relates to the current state of research and how her findings align or conflict with the existing literature. Another concerns the way she treats the responses of the interviewees. At times, she interprets them as an objective description of neo-traditionalism or of certain of its manifestations, when it would have been more appropriate to take into consideration that the interviewees may have varying levels of knowledge and differing backgrounds. Their descriptions of what they perceive or believe they perceive during the retreat can be influenced accordingly. Moreover, Quisay occasionally relies on the opinions of other individuals without clearly outlining their backgrounds. For instance, she quotes a certain “Danish Qasim” twice (p. 85–86), who claims to have made critical observations about neo-traditionalist circles that allegedly demonstrate racist and misogynistic attitudes among prominent neo-traditionalist shaykhs. However, Quisay not only fails to provide more information about Qasim beyond labelling him an “advocate against spiritual abuse” but also neglects to cite the original source from which she has taken the quotations. Moreover, in these and similar situations, it would have been intriguing to hear the perspectives of the three shaykhs on these topics. An interview with them, perhaps included as an appendix to the book, would have constituted a valuable addition. Lastly, albeit of lesser significance, the transliteration of Arabic words is chaotic and riddled with errors.

These critical points notwithstanding, Walaa Quisay’s book is highly recommended for those interested in contemporary Islam in general and neo-traditionalism in particular. It offers valuable insights into the genesis and development of this movement and the dynamics of the relationship between the leading shaykhs and the seekers in the West.

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