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Karen Armstrong presents Youssef Qaradawi as a moderate

Excerpt (pp. 185-186):

(W)hen Muslims look at Western society, they see no light, no heart and no spirituality. They want to hold on to their own religious and moral traditions and, at the same time, to try to incorporate some of the best aspects of Western civilization. Yusuf Abdallah al-Qaradawi, a graduate of al-Azhar, and a Muslim Brother, who is currently the director of the Centre for Sunnah and Sirah at the University of Qatar, takes a similar line. He believes in moderation, and is convinced that the bigotry that has recently appeared in the Muslim world will impoverish people by depriving them of the insights and visions of other human beings.

KAREN ARMSTRONG

ISLAM

A Short History



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government, and though he is often harried by the more conservative *mujtabids*, he strongly influences those in power. Soroush admires Khomeini, but has moved beyond him. He maintains that Iranians now have three identities: pre-Islamic, Islamic and Western, which they must try to reconcile. Soroush rejects the secularism of the West and believes that human beings will always need spirituality, but advises Iranians to study the modern sciences, while holding on to Shii tradition. Islam must develop its *fiqh*, so as to accommodate the modern industrial world, and evolve a philosophy of civil rights and an economic theory capable of holding its own in the twenty-first century.

Sunni thinkers have come to similar conclusions. Western hostility towards Islam springs from ignorance, Rashid al-Ghannouchi, the leader of the exiled Renaissance Party in Tunisia, believes. It also springs from a bad experience of Christianity, which did stifle thought and creativity. He describes himself as a “democratic Islamist” and sees no incompatibility between Islam and democracy, but he rejects the secularism of the West, because the human being cannot be so divided and fragmented. The Muslim ideal of *tawhid* rejects the duality of body and spirit, intellect and spirituality, men and women, morality and the economy, East and West. Muslims want modernity, but not one that has been imposed upon them by America, Britain or France. Muslims admire the efficiency and beautiful technology of the West; they are fascinated by the way a regime can be changed in the West without bloodshed. But when Muslims look at Western society, they see no light, no heart and no spirituality. They want to hold on to their own religious and moral traditions and, at the same time, to try to incorporate some of the best aspects of Western civilization. Yusuf Abdallah al-Qaradawi, a graduate of al-Azhar, and a Muslim Brother, who is currently the director of the Centre for Sunnah and Sirah at the University

of Qatar, takes a similar line. He believes in moderation, and is convinced that the bigotry that has recently appeared in the Muslim world will impoverish people by depriving them of the insights and visions of other human beings. The Prophet Muhammad said that he had come to bring a “Middle Way” of religious life that shunned extremes, and Qaradawi thinks that the current extremism in some quarters of the Islamic world is alien to the Muslim spirit and will not last. Islam is a religion of peace, as the Prophet had shown when he made an unpopular treaty with the Quraysh at Hudaibiyyah, a feat which the Quran calls “a great victory.”³ The West, he insists, must learn to recognize the Muslims’ right to live their religion and, if they choose, to incorporate the Islamic ideal in their polity. They have to appreciate that there is more than one way of life. Variety benefits the whole world. God gave human beings the right and ability to choose, and some may opt for a religious way of life—including an Islamic state—while others prefer the secular ideal.

“It is better for the West that Muslims should be religious,” Qaradawi argues, “hold to their religion, and try to be moral.”⁴ He raises an important point. Many Western people are also becoming uncomfortable about the absence of spirituality in their lives. They do not necessarily want to return to pre-modern religious lifestyles or to conventionally institutional faith. But there is a growing appreciation that, at its best, religion has helped human beings to cultivate decent values. Islam kept the notions of social justice, equality, tolerance and practical compassion in the forefront of the Muslim conscience for centuries. Muslims did not always live up to these ideals and frequently found difficulty in incarnating them in their social and political institutions. But the struggle to achieve this was for centuries the mainspring of Islamic spirituality. Western people must become aware that it is in their interests too that Islam remains healthy and strong.