

(p 270). Though the matter of independence is factually correct, the analysis of the movement is prone to misinterpretation.

In spite of these shortcomings, Mahmood's book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Islamic fundamentalism. It addresses some hitherto untouched areas, such as the place of democracy in an Islamic polity and the nature of *Shia* and *Sunni* fundamentalism. In its 455 pages, Mahmood explores a vast array of issues which, due to its short and crisp paragraphs with bold subtitles, makes it an excellent reference book. The book's weakness lies in the absence of serious analytical rigour. If only the author had pursued some of the questions he raised to their satisfactory end rather than leaving them open.

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### Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World

Fatima Mernissi

London: Virago, 1993

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The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi is probably most well-known for her *Woman and Islam* in which she argues that restrictions on women's freedom in some 'Islamic' states are not grounded in Quranic doctrine or early Islamic practice but on reactionary methods of social control introduced during the Umayyad dynasty. The interest generated by that work stemmed from its unusual combination of analytical rigour, based on a close textual analysis of historical and theological sources, and forceful polemic. The current book under review, in which the author explores 'the conflict between Islam and democracy' (p 15), again attempts to wed these formidable talents, but with less success.

Assessing the merits of a book such as this is a question of one's standards. Mernissi herself sets a rather limited goal: 'the book will have attained its objective if it succeeds in suggesting some of the techniques used in [the] ... manipulation of fears by pasting ancient anxieties onto modern ones' (p 15). She generally does deliver on this humble ambition. It is clear, however, that Mernissi has a larger agenda as well, which slowly reveals itself through her occasional rhetorical outbursts. For instance, she states in her final paragraph: 'We can bring a new world into being through all the scientific advances that allow us to communicate, to engage in unlimited dialogue, to create that global mirror in which all cultures can shine in their uniqueness ... [T]he fact that we must go forward toward it without any barriers no longer frightens me' (p 174). Unfortunately, what she has written in the rest of the book does nothing to justify this conclusion.

What she has done is investigate some of the obstacles that have tended to inhibit the establishment, let alone the consolidation, of democracy in the Islamic world, particularly the role played by various types of 'fear' (of the 'foreign West', of the Imam, and of such enlightenment notions as 'freedom of thought' and 'individualism'). This proves to be a useful device. Tracing deeply held ideas (in this case, fears) to their historical antecedents is Mernissi's strength as a thinker and writer. Discussing the tension between the violent *Khurijite* and intellectual *Mu'tazila* traditions of resistance to usurped authority, Mernissi constructs an elegant historical backdrop for understanding both militant 'fundamentalist' and liberal-secular opposition to authoritarian governments in the contemporary Muslim world. Marshalling an impressive array of historical evidence, she catalogues various failed attempts over the centuries to promote 'rationalism', tolerance and the primacy of 'personal opinion'. Today's pluralists are dismissed as purveyors of Western heresy just as the early rationalists

were denounced as Hellenizers. Mernissi concludes that this legacy of defeat has in effect paralysed contemporary humanist movements, transforming a fear of the past into a fear of the present, and by extension a fear of modernity itself (hence the book's subtitle).

It is such tenuous logical leaps that tend to call into question the analytical coherence of Mernissi's overall argument. It is a credit to her capacity to throw up stimulating formulations, however, that these shortcomings need not seriously detract from the value of reading her work. One can, if so inclined, simply ignore the excesses of theoretical abstraction and wait for one of her many experiments at connecting ideas from different spheres and different eras to yield a new way of thinking about Islamic political culture. Indeed, this is a book about political culture, a concept which has been revived in recent years as the study of 'civic traditions' (Robert Putnam), 'trust' (Francis Fukuyama), and other, less deterministic conceptions of power (what it means rather than that what it is used for).

The role of historical imagination in reinforcing the need for the type of order that only barriers, veils and walls can provide comes through clearly in Mernissi's tour through the intellectual terrain of Muslim political culture. The disorder of the pre-Islamic past—the 'time of ignorance' of *jahiliyya*—was rectified only through obedience and the curtailment of discussion, according to the dominant ideology of fear currently promulgated by Islamic states. Playing on the dread of a return to the violent and unregulated *jahiliyya* is a powerful weapon in the hands of despots. Mernissi's own fear is that the West's hostility towards Islam may be 'unveiling a modernity that seems in danger of being mistaken for that spurned *jahiliyya*' (p 115).

Despite this, Mernissi thinks the Gulf War may have begun to open up the mental space among the Muslim people for a new reaction to historical fears. Paradoxically, this has been accomplished not through positive persuasion, but by exposing the artificiality of the barriers that unaccountable leaders purport to have erected between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. The defencelessness of Baghdad put an end to the illusion of barriers, Mernissi contends. Her belief is that Muslims now see that democracy—particularly freedom of thought—has been the key to the West's strength. It has contributed to technological superiority and a longing for the future rather than a fear of the past. Her conclusions may strike many as oddly naïve, coming as they do alongside the views of those like Lee Kwan Yew, who see rampant individualism and moral decay as sowing the seeds of the West's demise.

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### The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871–1977

Tazeen M. Murshid

Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1995

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This interdisciplinary study of the construction and development of identity among Bengal Muslims seeks to challenge the notion that there exists some kind of monolithic Islamic world view. Arguing that there is no heterogeneity across Islamic communities, or indeed even within the Bengal Muslim community, Tazeen Murshid uses the intelligentsia as the vehicle for her thesis. The title is explained by her contention that identity formation among Bengal Muslims has been characterized by a tension between the religious and secular perceptions; that is, between accommodation and confrontation within the society. This 'state of uneasy balance oscillating between the two' has 'characterised the psyche of the intelligentsia' (pp 2, 3).