

Sadik J. Al-Azm

Rethinking Islamic Fundamentalism



Born 1934 in Damascus, Syria. Ph. D. in philosophy from Yale University in 1961. Lectured at the Universities of Yale, New York City, Damascus, Beirut, and Jordan from 1960-1969. Editor of the *Arab Studies Review*, 1969-1976. Professor of philosophy and sociology at the University of Damascus, 1977. Present position: Visiting professor at the Near Eastern Studies Department of Princeton University since 1988. Publications in English: *Kant's Theory of Time*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1967; *The Origins of Kant's Arguments in the Antinomies*, Oxford University Press, 1972; "Absolute Space and Kant's First Antinomy of Pure Reason" in *Kant-Studien*, Heft 2, 1968, pp. 151-164; Publications in Arabic: *Of Love and Arabic Courtly Love*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1968, *Self Criticism After the Defeat*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1968; *Critique of Religious Thought*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1969, *Materialism and History: A Defense*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1991. — Address: Near Eastern Studies Department, Jones Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg hoping to complete work started earlier and elsewhere on contemporary Islamic Fundamentalism and on Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* and the explosive international incident it created.

I succeeded in completing the Rushdie study both in English and Arabic. These two versions are not translations from one language to the other, but an independent writing and presenting of the same basic material and results *in English* and *in Arabic*. Translations of the English version into German and Italian have also become available (partially published in *Lettre Internationale*, No. 13, July 1991; and *Lettera Internazionale* No. 28, June 1991)*.

The main purpose of this study is to integrate both the Rushdie novel and affair into their historical European and Muslim contexts. For example, contrary to widespread belief in the West, the Arab world (i. e., the

* See the shortened version on pp. 166-185 of this volume.

heartlands of Islam) have witnessed a long and continuing series of Rushdie-like affairs and scandals since at least the 1920s. These religio-political incidents have been carefully monitored, reported, and commented on in the West by specialists, orientalists, journalists, and so on. Similarly, the Arab world had heard semi-indifferently echoes of the West's critiques of religion such as carried out by the Rabelais, the Voltaires, the Spinozas, the Marxes and the Nietzsches. The uniqueness of the Rushdie affair consists not in its exotism, oddity, or anything of the sort but in the fact, that, for the first time ever, a critical literary-religious scandal and affair engages deeply both Muslim East and secular West at one and the same time.

I also succeeded in completing the first draft (in English) of my critical study and re-evaluation of contemporary Muslim Fundamentalism. The following are examples of the issues explored and discussed in this work: (a) The debates in western scholarly literature on the question of the legitimacy of using such concepts as 'Fundamentalism', 'Revivalism', 'Islamism', and so on to refer to the Islamist phenomenon. (b) The cogency, accuracy, and scientific usefulness of explanations of the phenomenon as are couched in terms of such abstractions as: 'the return of Islam', 'Islam's rising tide', 'the Islamic impulse', 'the unsecularizability of Islam', etc. (c) The salvational reception of the Fundamentalist phenomenon by a large segment of the liberal, secular, and left-of-center Arab intelligentsia, particularly in the early 1980s. (d) The implicit importation by the more sophisticated Islamist ideologists of European structuralist and post-structuralist categories of thought to theorize their positions and defend their theses (all carried out in the name of a return to unadulterated Islamic 'authenticity'). The result is a very interesting and curious use of contemporary post-modernist European forms of 'irrationalism' by Islamist theoreticians and ideologists to state and defend basically pre-modern forms of 'irrationalism' and Fundamentalism. (e) Reasons why expectations and predictions in both East and West of an Islamist seizure of power in a major Arab country, à la Iran, are unfounded and most unlikely to be fulfilled.

During my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg I did my best to benefit to the utmost from contacts with scholars, colleagues, and students in German institutions of higher learning. Thus I had the privilege of speaking, lecturing, debating, and discussing at such distinguished places as the *Freie Universität Berlin*, the former *Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR*, the *Institut für Vergleichende Sozialforschung in Berlin*, the universities of Bonn, Bochum, Gießen, etc. I benefited greatly from exchanges of views about the topics of my research and the national and international developments unfolding in the Middle East (particularly the Gulf war, its ramifications and aftermaths) with such distinguished German experts and specialists as

Fritz Steppat, Baber Johansen, and Friedemann Büttner of the *Freie Universität* Berlin, Gerhard Höpp of the *Institut für Allgemeine Geschichte*, Karl Malzer and Holger Preibler of the University of Leipzig, Stefan Wild and Reinhard Schulze of the University of Bonn, Werner Ende of the University of Freiburg, Gerhard Endress and Christian Uhlig of the University of Bochum, and Jochen Blaschke of the *Institut für Vergleichende Sozialforschung* in Berlin.

I would like to express my gratitude to the library and secretarial staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg for ministering to our scholarly needs with such patience, expertise, dedication, and punctuality.