

Travelling Home: Essays on Islam in Europe

By *Abdal Hakim Murad*

Cambridge, The Quilliam Press, 2020

Reviewed by *M. Ali Lakhani*



In a divisive world of contested politics about identity and belonging, what does it mean to be at home? The subject of this book's eleven 'polemical essays' (2), 'conceived in the context of an age of anxiety and declension' (9), is, as the title suggests, the theme of homecoming. The journey it explores is about the exile's return to a metaphysical homeland, to that Center where identity and belonging are harmonized as kinship and Presence. Though the context of the book's focus is the ideological faultlines between and among Europeans and Muslims, the journeying hero, the *salik*, is portrayed as the prototypical Ishmaelite, the 'paradigmatic refugee' (6) in search of a 'sanctuary secure' (Q28:57, 29:67)

The author, Abdal Hakim Murad (Cambridge Professor Timothy Winter), is widely regarded as a leading Muslim intellectual, having studied at both Cambridge and SOAS in the West, and at Al Azhar in the East. A renowned commentator on Islam and the West, his essays and lectures eschew uncritical, simplistic ideology, being equally wary of both secular and religious dogmatism. Instead, they are rooted principally in the *usul*, or essential foundations, and are therefore critical of dogmatic deviations from the commitment to *tawhid*, or integral unity, and to the compassionate pluralism of 'Traditional Islam.' Whether his focus is on *tanfiri* attacks by Islamist extremists or on the atrocities carried out

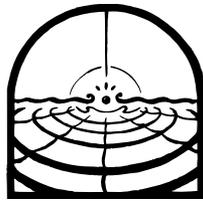
by Orthodox Christians on Muslims in Bosnia, whether it is on examining the secularist biases in education (both in the Muslim world or in the West) or on critiquing materialistic economics, the scalpel of his intellect is always trained on exposing false ideological premises and on demonstrating how these detract us from our spiritual purpose and our common humanity.

The book is directed to ‘dissidents and dervishes of conscience’ (3), to those who seek ‘a more intellectually and morally coherent response to the present emergency of Muslim integration than either secular scientism or Islamism’ (3). This integration must be sought, Murad argues, beyond the flawed cultures of what Benjamin Barber has termed MacWorld and Žižek has termed MacJihad. It is to be found in a recovery of sound principles embedded in our very being, in our primordial nature or *fitra*, conformity to which constitutes the very essence of religion (Q30:30). The book therefore is ‘not a call for reform so much as an attempt to repair what has been deformed’ (4). It is this deformation which has led to alienation and conflict, and this can only be repaired by a principial authenticity, not rooted in the ego but in the transcendent and creative forces that inform love and life itself.

In the opening essay, ‘Can liberalism tolerate Islam?’, the author points to a calcifying intolerance within modern European secular liberalism whose soft totalitarianism (what René Guénon once termed the ‘equalitarian passion for uniformity’) rejects all traditional pluralistic values — both Muslim and Christian — in favor of ‘the moral consensus of a secularised and individualistic culture’ (31). The resulting secular dominance, which places at stake ‘the survival of healthy diversity’, should, Murad argues, create a common cause among all religious groups, an *alliance sacré* of faith cultures, to defend their traditional values: ‘the fact of Muslim support for core principles of Christian ethics would give Islam a vital and appreciated place and would demolish the old polarity’ (31).

The essay titled ‘British Muslims and the rhetoric of indigenisation’ addresses the problem of how difficult it remains for Muslims to integrate within secular European societies in which values are fluid and not rooted in perennial truths. Murad examines the Reformation’s schism, drawing affinities between the deeper belief structures and practices of Catholic and Protestant Christianity and Islam, and noting how these

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