

Book Review

Walaa Quisay (2023). *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodoxy, Spirituality and Politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

by Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky¹

There has been a lot of interest in studying how Muslims of Europe adapt to modernity in Western countries. In the last two decades, most of the research focused on Islamist movements, political Islam, Salafi movements, and reformist Islam in the West. However, Walaa Quisay's work goes beyond this to explore the rise of neo-traditionalism, often understudied, as an emerging alternative Islamic authority in the West. The work aims to explain how neo-traditionalism has emerged, established its authority, and engaged with modernity. It also focuses on its appeal, internal contradictions and socio-political implications. Through studying the life and discourses of three charismatic neo-traditionalist sheiks, white converts such as Hamza Yusuf, Abdul Hakim Murad and Umar Faruq Abdullah, the author mainly shows how they collectively presented Islamic traditionalism not only as the voice of pure Islam through otherising religious discourses of Salafism and reformist Islam as the products of post-colonial complexities, but also as a paradigmatic critique of modernity. Despite such grand claims, the author highlights that neo-traditionalism has ultimately ended up serving the very power structure of modernity, particularly nation-states. Neo-traditionalism in Islam in the West is a result of an ethnographic study. The author spends years of participating, experiencing and interviewing the neo-traditionalist sheiks and followers in their spiritual sites. The chapters of the book broadly cover the emergence of neo-traditionalism, its key discourses and implications on the Muslim societies in the West and Muslim world.

In terms of the emergence and key discourses of the neo-traditionalist movement in the West, Quisay's analysis in the initial chapters shows that it is a recent phenomenon that emerged after the decline of the Salafi movement's appeal to Western Muslims in the 1980s. This decline, referred to as 'Salafi burnout,' was characterised by intra-group factionalism. Initially, Salafism had dominantly influenced the religious discussions of Western Muslims by offering a 'de-culturalised Islam' that allowed new converts and traditional immigrant Muslims to transcend ethnic differences and identify themselves as followers of authentic Islam. The decline of Salafism in the 1980s left a vacuum that was occupied by neo-traditionalism. The appeal of neo-traditionalism mainly lies in its ability to follow the very logic of Salafism, presenting traditional Islam as authentic, pure, and intellectually rooted while portraying the latter as contextual, modern, and cultural (p. 24-25). Furthermore, as neo-traditionalism has gradually become an important factor in shaping Western Islam, the leading figures of the movement formed a loose network among themselves as an epistemic community, and institutionalised their scholarly activism through building new educational institutions such as Zaytuna College and the Cambridge Muslim College, and occasional spiritual retreats for seekers.

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Quisay also traces the core argument of the neo-traditionalist sheiks. They argue that modernity has broken down the metaphysical foundation of human comprehension of the world, leading to a crisis of meaning and promoting radical relativism. Therefore, contemporary modernist and reformist Islam, which seeks to integrate Islam with modernity, is seen as a reaction stemming from an inferiority complex in response to the rise of modernity, and an outcome of a traumatic experience of the dissolution of traditional system of knowledge, rather than as an objective understanding of modernity. The neo-traditionalist solution to the modern problem is not the reformation of Islam but to reclaim and restore the metaphysics of traditional Islam (p. 47-48). In the following chapters, Quisay explores how neo-traditionalist sheiks try to restore traditionalist Islam at their spiritual retreat sites. This includes emphasising the authority of sheiks, belief in miracles, the importance of traditional methods of transmitting knowledge, rereading the classical works of Islamic law, spirituality and theology, and making journey to places where they believe remnants of traditional Islam are preserved such as Mauritania, Turkey and Morocco (p. 67-123).

Moreover, Quisay allocated significant portion of the work to examine how this authority is translated to address various socio-political issues such as Islamophobia, racism, and the marginalisation faced by Muslims in the West. In this process, she sheds light on the concept of 'cosmic legitimisation', which guides neo-traditionalists in responding to these major socio-political questions in the West. Cosmic legitimisation refers to the idea of respecting an orderly-hierarchical society and the harmonious relationship between the cosmos and the world. Neo-traditionalists use this concept to challenge any attempt to critique power structures or structural reasons as the root cause responsible for these socio-political issues. They argue that such a critique of power prevents Muslims from examining the broader spiritual and metaphysical aspects of injustice, and pushes them to deconstruct the order and to challenge 'stability' in the world, which they believe carry cosmic meanings. Their solution to the problem is self-reflection and spiritual empowerment, understanding injustice as a tribulation from God to evaluate the spiritual status of believers (p. 123-148).

In light of this logic, Muslim civil activism to counter right-wing Islamophobic movements by forming political alliances with left-wing social movements is also criticised by neo-traditionalist sheiks. They argue that racism is not a structural political issue, but rather a spiritual crisis within the Western society. As a result, they advocate for engagement with right-wing conservative establishments in promoting common values. However, neo-traditionalists believe that a significant challenge for this engagement with right-wing conservatives is the influence of post-colonial cultural Islam brought by Muslim immigrants from the global south who have internalised activist epistemology while rejecting the metaphysical foundations of traditional Islam (p. 150-170).

The book explores how these discourses have enabled neo-traditionalist sheiks to become key players in global geopolitics after the 9/11. In this sense, Quisay strongly argues that the politically neutral stance of neo-traditionalism has itself become a political position, positioning neo-traditionalists as a potential bulwark against radical Islam globally, and as close allies of Arab authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world. This has also allowed them to establish an alternative religious authority to counter the democratic aspirations of the Arab world after the Arab Spring. The author further highlights the irony in this situation, as neo-traditionalism inherently holds an anti-modernist worldview while being used by regimes that increasingly seek to portray them as modern and progressive (p. 180-200). Finally, Quisay evaluates the reception of these ideas among the students and followers of the neo-traditionalist sheiks in the final chapter of the book. She writes that there are three types of responses: complete acceptance, complete scrutiny, and privatisation of the beliefs. Interestingly, her analysis finds that the percentage of complete acceptance of neo-traditionalist discourses among its followers is minimal compared to the other two types of responses (p. 205-206).

Examining these arguments surrounding neo-traditionalism in the context of the rising right-wing populism in Europe highlights the challenges it presents regarding the role of Islam and Muslim communities in navigating issues of belonging and identity. Many interpret the discourse associated with neo-traditionalist responses as pro-status quo since it aims to reconcile with right-wing establishments. However, there has yet to be a comprehensive study that situates these various narratives within a broader framework, which would enhance our understanding of the movement as a whole. Quisay's work addresses this intellectual gap effectively. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that her study on neo-traditionalism in the West significantly enriches existing scholarly discussions on Islam in Europe and on a global scale. Neo-traditionalism is a worldwide phenomenon with different expressions based on local contexts. Specifically, Quisay's research explains the growing interest among certain segments of European Muslim communities in studying traditional Islamic sciences, reviving classical texts, and acknowledging traditional religious authorities. One of the key strengths of this work is its exploration of the tension between the fundamental tenets of the neo-traditionalist school of thought and the politics of the modern state. It carefully illustrates how, in some instances, sheikhs have inadvertently reinforced the very paradigms they intended to resist. The study also addresses the mixed reactions and uncertainties that followers of these sheikhs experience, as they often find that the discourses present more dilemmas than solutions regarding the role of Islam in multicultural societies. The thoroughness of Quisay's treatment of the subject makes this work a significant advancement in the study of European Islam. However, a critical point to note is that the book does not provide an in-depth analysis of the intellectual evolution of traditionalism and neo-traditionalism or their various schools of thought within a global context. Such an analysis would help readers more precisely locate neo-traditionalism in the West.