

Mourad Wahba. *Fundamentalism and Secularization*. Robert Beshara (trans.). London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 2022. Hardback (\$103.50). 176 pp. ISBN 9781350228689.

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It is a common complaint that Western philosophy and especially Anglo-American philosophy are too insular and self-absorbed when it comes to engaging with other global philosophical traditions. Yet Robert Beshara's translation of the North African philosopher Mourad Wahba's *Fundamentalism and Secularization* sets out to actually do something about it. Consisting of an interview between author and translator, translations of two supplementary essays and a translation of the original Arabic text of *Fundamentalism and Secularization*, the book offers a glimpse into a world of erudite philosophical debate that tends to be limited to those who speak Arabic. From his chair at Egypt's Ain Shams University, the distinguished professor has spent decades observing profound changes in Egyptian society, combining elements of analytic, continental, Islamic, and African philosophy to present his original Arabic-speaking audience with a novel philosophical project that is resolutely relativistic in its style of thinking while rejecting both fundamentalism and postmodernism. Instead, Wahba places his hopes in the reclamation of a rationalist Islamic philosophical tradition he traces back to ibn Rushd, which he argues has been wrongly ceded to the West at a great cost.

While Wahba's work as a philosopher must ultimately stand or fall on its philosophical merits, I also approach the text with great interest as an anthropologist – and here the book is more than happy to oblige. The text begins with an interview that situates Wahba as a human being within a broader intellectual milieu. We learn about his influences, alliances, and antagonisms. This includes encouragement from the head of the Protestant Churches of Egypt (the book was originally published by the Egyptian Coptic Church's Dar Al-Thaqafa press). He also relates engagements with other North African philosophers and his role in establishing a community of academic philosophers throughout Africa. Wahba further speaks of his rejection of Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis (2021: ix), his break with Enrique Dussel over the "counter-enlightenment" tendencies of Liberation Theology (2021: xiii) and his ambition that ibn Rushd's argument for the free interpretation of sacred texts might supplant the relative literalism of ibn Taymiyyah and the Muslim Brotherhood (2021: xvii). All of this helps make the book a better teaching resource by motivating the argument and providing crucial context.

Beshara notes in his interview how Wahba's interest in the late twentieth century in the parallels between the Muslim Brotherhood and the New Right in the

West anticipated later work like the response of the filmmaker Adam Curtis to the terror decade of the early 2000s, *The Power of Nightmares*. One could also easily add Tariq Ali's contemporaneous book, *Clash of Fundamentalisms* here. Yet the importance of Wahba's intervention is not merely due to the principle of priority. There is something glib and superficial about these works compared to Wahba's text: Curtis with his MTV-inspired editing and tendency to luxuriate in grotesque camp; Ali's book festooned with Bush's face swapped into a picture of bin Laden's turbaned head. Wahba likewise makes no secret of his dislike of fundamentalism, but he is also committed to taking fundamentalism seriously philosophically.

Moreover, in an inversion of the now-troublingly cliché trope of an inert "indigenous" culture awaiting the enlivening touch of Western capitalist colonization, Wahba's deference to his Arabic-speaking audience tends to render the West in a backgrounded, even exoticized status while the primary references are either ancient or Arabic. Wahba promotes the rationalist strains of Arabic and Islamic philosophies that grew from (and drew much of their legitimacy from) the translation of ancient texts in a range of languages (including Greek and Latin but also Sanskrit, Persian, and Aramaic among others) into Arabic. The problem as Wahba sees it is that this openness and relativism has been ceded to the West, which began its own translation movement following the discovery of later Islamic thinkers like ibn Sina (Avicenna) and ibn Rushd (Averroes), leading in turn to the "re-discovery" of the ancients.

One of the most interesting threads of the book for this reader was this more sincere attempt to put both traditional and modern Islamic thought in direct conversation with Western conservative thought from Edmund Burke to the John Birch Society, Jerry Falwell, and the Moral Majority. For obvious reasons, these traditions tend to frame themselves in isolation from one another and yet Wahba draws out important commonalities and helps the reader understand why they would present themselves as compelling within certain political, social and economic contexts – namely secularization. A leitmotif here is his claim that there is an important epistemological disagreement running through ostensibly political disagreements between liberals, conservatives, radicals, fundamentalists, and secularists. Namely, there are good reasons to doubt our own whims and intuitions, but then where should humans turn for authoritative truth claims? For a long time, sacred texts were meant to serve this function. Yet with time their authority became increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of social transformations and novel scientific discoveries.

This is not to say that fundamentalism for Wahba is merely a modern phenomenon. While he traces back much of what he terms the "new fundamentalism" to conflicts at the heart of the advent of modernity via Burke to the French Revolution and then back to the conflict between Galileo, Copernicus, and the

Catholic Church over its dogma concerning the Earth's place in the universe, he also sees fundamentalist currents in pre-modern Islam. Chief among these are figures like Al-Ghazzali and ibn Taymiyyah, who promoted the practice of *takfir*, arguing that those who engaged less literally with sacred texts and their dogmas were unbelievers. Drawing on Kant, Wahba sees this as a faulty commitment to an "absolute" that is bound to fail since it confuses an inherently particular and partial perspective for something transcendent and suitable for all times and places.

Wahba's philosophy is as eminently debatable as his intellectual history, and no doubt Wahba would be the first to admit that his own account is subject to the exigencies of its own production and should not be taken as any absolute (just as he argues *laïcité* can become stifling if it becomes an end in itself). Yet for all the hand-wringing about the rise of Islamic "fundamentalism" in the Middle East and beyond, it is often much more "secular" Muslims like Wahba who have won the argument in the halls of power across the region, making their positions of particular interest to outside observers – even as secular Muslims have often been treated as less authentically Muslim. So whether or not one is ultimately convinced by Wahba, there is a certain value in tracing the movement of ideas across barriers of language and culture. In a time when absolutes are viewed with skepticism, perhaps we can all put some of our faith in the creative potential of translation.