

Book Review

Tariq Ali

The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity

London, New York: Verso, 2003

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

Tariq Ali is a public intellectual, who writes informed by a socialist perspective: Not very many intellectuals do so anymore. Some call this radical, and I would too, because he goes back to fundamentals. This book draws upon the personal, such as his family history in Lahore, Punjab in what was India and is now Pakistan, living in a family that included politicians, and his non-religious upbringing, interspersed with one effort to introduce Islam into his life. He also draws upon the history of his region in northern India and Pakistan, the partition of India and the reasons fundamentalism emerged in these areas. He also draws on his student activism and the various socialist analyses extant at that time. Finally, he applies his wide reading, research and experience in the areas he describes. Ali is author of two dozen non-fiction books, most recently *A Banker for All Seasons* (2007), *The Duel* (2008), *The Obama Syndrome* (2010), and *The Extreme Centre: A Warning* (2015). He is a journalist, historian, and political activist. Ali is a filmmaker and clearly a sought-after speaker. He has written a book about Edward Said, another British public intellectual.

Ali says what he thinks, and what he thinks is that fundamentalists have regularly caused problems, slaughter and destruction, from the Christian Crusaders in the Middle Ages to the Protestants in the US to Hindus in India to the Mujahideen and Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. If he were writing this book today, I imagine he would include Islamic State. He makes the point that fundamentalists have behaved in an authoritarian and intolerant manner but also describes in detail how politicians, the military, and governments facilitated and supported them for their own purposes. This led to terrible losses of life and partisan divisions.

The Clash of Fundamentalisms does not dwell at length on the beliefs of the fundamentalists. Interestingly, he sees the Christian Crusaders and some US governments as fundamentalist, as well as the various Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists in power in South and Southeast Asia. He makes a unique contribution integrating politics, the military and religious fundamentalism. He points out that the reason Islam (and perhaps some other religions) have become much more orthodox and rigid is the set of ideological delusions and systems of institutional oppression which the Enlightenment sought to allay (Ali, 2002). This is not a simple story.

Ali describes in some detail the ideological, political and religious divisions in his home region. In doing so, and in yet more detail, he makes clear the Middle East and Islam are not one, unified entity. Ali points out, for example, that the Muslim-majority provinces of Bengal and Punjab remained loyal to the British Raj and voted for secular parties controlled by the landed

gentry. Unlike “Pakistani mythology,” separatism at this stage was less an aim and more a bargaining tool for a fair share of the post-colonial spoils (p. 231). He describes the official Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia was a political deal and blames the Indian separation on Nehru’s romantic nationalism (p. 7).

Ali does not address the issues involved from one perspective, but rather integrates, benefits from and thoroughly incorporates learning from poetry, literature, religious texts, history, political speeches, the media and women. This is a cultural perspective as much as a religious or political one. He creates an understanding of how, why and what happened. He does not tolerate self-serving dishonesty nor the self-proclaimed moral and religious that work with those with opposite beliefs to their own benefit in order to secure resources and power. He talks a straight line. He knows much about the deals the powerful have made. The book does not focus on the beliefs of fundamentalists so much as on how they became powerful.

Ali was active in the radical student movements in Pakistan and describes the roles of Maoists, Stalinists, and Trotskyists, the “Communists” of the time, who tried to take over the student movement (as they also tried in Europe and North America). He describes the variety of political, social and religious movements active in discrediting and enfeebling the student and liberal democratic movements.

His combination of the personal and the political and his inclusion of the roles of women and minorities, paints a clear picture of why India split into India and Pakistan, then Pakistan, in turn, split into Pakistan and Bangladesh. He is particularly critical of the role the military has played in Pakistan’s history and government.

Ali is also very critical of the colonial and US imperialistic roles in Asia and the Middle East. He paints an Eastern perspective on the US interventions in politics, almost always in support of dictators, fundamentalists, extreme right-wing governments, and governments that sought to keep modernity out of their countries, Hilary Clinton’s modest efforts to support women and civil society notwithstanding. The devastating results of most of these interventions are clear.

Tariq Ali knew Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* was reviewed in *The Innovation Journal* (Glor, 2017). While Said’s book criticizes the western perspective on the Orient, Ali’s book criticizes the eastern power perspectives and actions. I would like to hear Ali’s take on the recent unwillingness of middle eastern, south Asian, US and western governments to support the democratic movement in Syria, which grew out of the Arab Spring movement. The Obama government lent moral courage to that movement, and provided limited material support for it, but did not get otherwise involved. It allowed Russia to maintain its port on the Mediterranean Sea.

About the Author:

Eleanor D. Glor worked as a public servant in the Canadian public sector at four levels of government and has written about public sector innovation for publication since the 1980s. She ran the Innovation Salon, a meeting on public sector innovation, from 1995-2005 and is the publisher and founding editor of *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*.

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