BOOK REVIEWS

Ann Norton, *On the Muslim Question*

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Historically, most Western nations, from the age of enlightenment, established a firm divide between church and state. This chasm engendered a concept that stressed the separation of religious morality from secular law. The assumption that the secularisation of the world is a necessary precondition for the establishment of modern, democratic form of government, has gained a lot of currency among many Western policymakers. Indeed, the need for reform is a necessity in the Muslim context, but the path towards realising it in the form of secularisation is a debatable issue. Western history is characterised by the conflict between church and state, and this conflict has no precedent in the Muslim history. The nexus between religion and secular obligations, and a societal consensus is not as prominent in the Muslim context as it is in the Western societies. Ann Norton's book, "On the Muslim Question" provides deeper political and philosophical insights into the intricate relationship between Muslims and the West. Norton asserts that in the contemporary times the Muslim question is as fundamental as the emancipation of Jews in the context of enlightenment philosophy. Norton organises her work efficiently and manages to weave together the distinct but related topics in 2 parts containing 10 chapters along with an introduction and an index. Part I, "Muslim Question," examines a range of issues, from modern Muslim discourses on freedom of speech, women and terrorism, to democracy and equality. In the opening chapter, Norton analyses the issues pertaining to freedom of speech and expression. The Muslim reactions to controversies like Rushdie's satanic verses, the Danish cartoons, and the critical film about Islam by the Dutch provocateur, Theo van Gogh, perhaps reflect an underlying repugnance to liberal thought about free speech. At the root of the conflict between Muslims and the West, Norton identifies the Muslim treatment of women that has dominated the Western perception of Muslims. In the case of Ayan Hirshi Ali, she discloses that how the media and press can present Muslim women as passive victims of male power than as strong feminists who repudiate Islam and articulate against it. Norton observes that in order to avoid the scathing criticism from the critical analysts and feminists on the continuing oppression of women in the West, a

lot of attention is given to the plight of women in the Muslim World (p. 67). In the chapter, "Terror," the author addresses the question of terrorism. While emphasising that the fear of Islam and Muslims in the West has construed Islam as a religion that promotes terrorism, she argues that the fear of terrorism is real and its threats are true threats. In contrast to the general overview of citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards terrorism, professionals like, Ehud Barak, Robert Pape, and Alan Kruger conceive it as a familiar political choice rather than a non-reasonable strategy (p. 89). On the question of equality, Norton refers to the work of Syed Qutb and states that, for Qutb, there is equality of men and women in Islam, and their complimentary nature to one another. Equality is an important constituent of a modern democratic process. Norton draws our attention to the notion of equality as emphasised by Islam with regard to the question of democracy in the contemporary Middle East. According to her, Derrida insisted on the non existence of democratic values in Islam. The vision is seen to be structured by the parochial understanding of faith. Further, she advocates the presence of democratic values in the Muslim tradition, and recognises the work of classical Muslim philosophers, affirming their familiarity among the American democrats.

Part II, "In the Western street," analyses the European circumferences, American empire, Islamofascism, and the theory of clash of civilisations. The claim that Christianity has been very influential in the evolution of intellectual and political cultures of Europe and the subversion of Christianity means the subversion of democratic values is interpreted as a Janet and John reading of history. Norton emphasises that the idea of "Christian Europe," may make sense from a certain perspective but it largely ignores the diverse religious and historical roots of Europe. In chapter 8, Norton examines the work of Paul Berman. Berman visualises a nexus between Islamofascism and Nazism, considering Islamofascism as a successor to Nazism. Further, she discloses that the imagined history of Berman fails to acknowledge the absence of Islamofascism in a sense that Arabs and Muslims have already opposed fascism. Norton deconstructs the myth of American exceptionalism that emerged out of the exclusionist answer to the tumultuous influx of immigrants and their beliefs. Ultimately, she repudiates the clash of civilizations thesis, arguing that such a clash is not borne out in the daily lives of the people. Apart from the realm of legislation, the clash of civilizations theory is resisted and refuted by the social realities of the people.

The Work provides an insightful critique of existing forms of studying, interpreting and understanding Islam in the West. While offering a critical insight into concepts such as democracy, freedom of speech, Islamofascism, women, and the clash of civilizations, Norton reveals a different perspective on Islam by emphasizing its dynamic interaction with the West — in contrast to the caricatured

and stereotyped perception of Islam nurtured by the more robust purveyors of hate. The author makes a convincing case that, as in the past, the fear of Islam will prove to have been highly exaggerated. Throughout, she tries to approach Islam and the Muslim question by confronting the preconceived historical and contemporary ideological flaws surrounding the homogenous, misconstrued, and parochial understanding of Islam.

The major weakness of the book, however is that at some places the author construes an image of Islam and Muslims as fundamentally and irrevocably opposed to everything the West perceives and acknowledges. For instance, on the question of veil, Norton discerns veil as an indication of lack of freedom for women. This vague perception, moreover with its symbolic significance has projected veil as an object of political strife and cultural debate. Despite the delicacy of the issue, veil succeeds in deconstructing orientalist perception of veiling by contradicting Western stereotypes of the Muslim women as passive, weak and oppressed. The deconstruction provokes a reconsideration of firmly established discourses portraying orientalism as a veil of ignorance that has stemmed from the collective hatred of foreign cultures. Similarly, on the issue of democracy, the Muslims are depicted as the “Others,” having no tolerance for democratic values. But rather than being diametrically opposed to the principles of democracy, the Muslim tradition and the revolutionary movements in the Muslim World, including the Arab spring demonstrate a complex yet different perspective on the issue.

Finally, it can be said that Norton asks important questions that need to be answered with regard to the Western investments in their illusions of the Muslim peoples. In a nutshell, “On the Muslim Question,” is an indispensable reading for scholars as well as those interested in understanding the complex relationship between Islam and the West.