Bassam Tibi has carved out an academic niche for himself primarily as a commentator on the modern phenomenon known as political Islam, also referred to pejoratively as Islamic fundamentalism. His latest work dealing with this subject rests on the basic (and tediously repeated) theme that Islamic fundamentalism is essentially incompatible with notions of Western-style democracy and human rights, the adoption of which notions alone may lead the way to universal harmonious coexistence. He is careful to disengage Islam as a belief system from this general indictment and frequently repeats his own subscription to a tolerant, ethically conceived Islam, shorn of any political aspirations, which is the only kind of Islam "permissible" in his blueprint for global coexistence.

The book’s main flaw, as I perceive it, is that Tibi does not try to probe into what each camp may mean when it bandies the term democracy about. There is no hint of awareness that when Westerners talk about democracy, they are referring to a highly reified concept that may have little bearing on reality, especially as perceived by the non-Westerner. Similarly, when certain Muslims (I certainly cannot claim that this is valid for all Muslims) talk about democracy, whether for or against it, they may have a totally different definition or rather perception of democracy than that which is current among Westerners. That Western-style democracy, tainted by its associations with Western imperialism and hubris, should be suspect in the eyes of many should not be wholly unexpected. When the modern Westerner says democracy is a good thing, the modern non-Westerner may well understand it to mean that democracy is a good thing for Westerners. After all, the era of Western inauguration of the democratic experiment was also followed by some of the most brutal and bloodiest episodes directed against non-Europeans and non-Christians. As Tibi himself mentions on p. 204, the Declaration of the Rights of Man by France was issued on 26 August 1789, and the American Bill of Rights was adopted shortly thereafter. Subsequently the French would go on to decide that the Rights of Man did not extend, for example, to the North Africans under their dominion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and savagely repress the Algerians and others who would demand their freedom. In North America, European settlers resolved the issue of equalitarian power-sharing with non-Europeans, despite the impressive Bill of Rights, by full-scale massacres of native Americans. Jim Crow laws that mandated discriminatory treatment of African-Americans in the southern United States would not be repealed until the 1960s. More directly relevant to the Middle East experience, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had to be displaced...
in the middle of this century so that Israel, the Middle East's most vaunted
democracy, could be brought into existence by the British. No wonder the
term "democracy" often leaves a bad aftertaste in the mouth of the subaltern,
Muslim or non-Muslim.

Tibi refers to this dichotomous understanding of Western-style
democracy and the world order it promotes, but dismisses it as unworthy of
serious consideration. On p. 41 he quotes John Kelsay from his Islam and War,
"For the West and its friends, the present international order provides
freedom, security, dignity. But for Arabs, Muslims, and developing nations,
there is only oppression, exploitation, and dishonor." Tibi is of the opinion
that this mind-set has led to an increase in a jihad-like mentality among
Muslim peoples. In his view, Islamic fundamentalism is "the major collective
choice in the World of Islam at present" (p. 78). He concedes, however, the
current minority status of fundamentalists. On what sources does Tibi base
this alarmist depiction? The countries he singles out as fundamentalist, Algeria
(where the fundamentalists are in opposition), Sudan, Iran, and Afghanistan
are four out of roughly 43 Muslim majority countries. This is, therefore,
another major problem of the book. Islamic fundamentalism is understood
by the author to be the most representative and popular expression of
primarily Arab and Muslim discontent with the prevailing world order. By
using the term fundamentalism, in the singular, to label the modern
phenomenon of resurgent Islam, he has promoted a unidimensional and
univocal view of this phenomenon, ignoring other manifestations of Islamic
resurgence. If Islamic fundamentalism primarily refers to politicized Islam
in our own times, then one can by no means restrict this term to those who
insist upon the applicability of an unchanging shari'a (Islamic canon law) to
the twentieth century. The broad and multifaceted phenomenon of resurgent
political Islam is better served by the term Islamism (unattractive though it
is), under whose rubric we may subsume all those variegated groups who
insist on the increased visibility of Islam both as an ethical system and as a
political ideology. Islamists may range from advocates of an unchanging
shari'a to modernists who claim that the shari'a is badly in need of reform to
continue to be applicable in the modern period; the latter may include
feminists as well, men and women, who read women's emancipatory agendas
into reinterpreted scripture. They all have in common their recognition of
the centrality of Islamic injunctions in shaping their private and public lives,
but they frequently disagree on the stratagems, hermeneutic, and political,
for understanding and implementing them. In this sense, both Sayyid Qutb
and Muhammad Abduh are Islamists and even fundamentalists when
understood in this broad sense, although their reformist visions diverge. Tibi
clearly uses fundamentalist in a denigratory sense to impugn those whose
views he is at odds with, while reserving "enlightened Muslim" for those he
approves of. Needless to say, Sayyid Qutb is the first and Abduh is the second
type of Muslim.

There is a considerable number of Islamists who insist that Islam, through
its recommendation of shura or "consultation," does advocate democracy in
the sense of governance through popular will. On this issue, both
fundamentalists in Tibi's narrow sense and modernist Muslims would concur.
If anything, this is the feather in political Islam’s cap. The earliest history of Islam, the era of the Rightly-Guided caliphs (632–661 CE), represents for Muslims the height of just and representative government. True, the Qur’anic concept of shura does not even come close to the modern notion of parliamentary democracy; but then why should it have in the seventh century? After all, neither did the classical Athenian version of democracy. What the Qur’anic concept does, however, is provide the germ of an idea that could bring various ideological factions together within the world of Islam. The shura need not be considered an alternative to Western democracy as Tibi suggests (p. 142) but its complement. Such an attitude could serve as the basis for a rapprochement with the Western world. In my opinion, Tibi fundamentally misunderstands Islamists who insist on the legitimacy of the shura alone and reject Western–style democracy. This does not mean that they are against the civil rights of individuals or against representative government per se; they, after all, often demand these very rights from their own governments. The debate is rather being constructed around who best represents the ideals of democracy. In one sweeping condemnation of the fundamentalists’ nostalgia for the glory of the idealized Islamic past, Tibi states that “at issue is, however, the real Islamic history, not the model for it” (p. 175). One could say precisely the same about democratic praxis in the modern West; that for non-Westerners in general, the issue at stake is the actual exclusivist policies of certain Western democracies and not the idealized concept of democracy itself.

Let’s face it: the discriminatory picture of selective Western–style democracies briefly depicted at the beginning of this review essay resonates strongly in the minds of third world peoples, and especially of Muslims. This is a point that Tibi barely dwells on. Tibi chronicles at some length the lack of political and human rights in several countries of the Middle East. In Kuwait, for example, many long–term residents in the country are debarred from citizenship (p. 194). Not once in the book, however, does Tibi mention that Germany, his adopted country, until very recently did not grant citizenship to many of its long–term Turkish residents, many of whom were native–born, and who were relegated instead to the notorious Gastarbeiter status. France routinely discriminates against its citizens of North African descent, and Britain, in spite of its large Muslim population, officially recognizes only (Anglican) Christianity as its national religion. It should be noted that the less perfectly democratic country of Egypt accords official status to (Coptic) Christianity. Western claims of having realized democracy, therefore, sound to the non–Western ear insincere and facetious; in religiously charged terms, they even smack of godlessness (kufr; Tibi, p. 11). Incendiary though the last pronouncement may be, this indictment should indicate to the thoughtful observer that as long as Western governments are perceived as falling short of the ideals of true representation and justice for all (for what is democracy without justice?), and as long as they continue to exclude certain people from full participatory citizenship on the basis of their ethnicity and religious affiliation, democracy of any stripe will be a hard sell. When Islamists take the democratic route to power, as they did in Algeria, only to be denied the victory they had won, democracy itself is delegitimized as a political process.
Tibi’s knowledge of medieval Islamic political thought and institutions leaves much to be desired and impugns his credibility as a political historian. He repeats a rather tired bromide that “in Islam there is no cultural understanding of individuation, and thus no concept of individual rights” (p. 91). Islamic law actually came to posit certain “essential interests” (al-masalih aldaruriya), five in all, that were to be guaranteed every individual. These “interests” (protection of life, religion, intellect, property, and lineage, to which some also add dignity) have been understood by modernist Muslims in particular as constituting an Islamic Bill of Rights. Surely al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyya are not the most important medieval jurists as Tibi states (p. 70); where are al-Shafi’i and the other eponymous founders of the Sunni madhahib (schools of law) in this constellation? The twin concepts din wa dawk (roughly, “religion and state”) were hardly created ex nihilo by modern Muslim activists as Tibi maintains (p. 165); they are simply the latest reincarnation of the medieval coupling of din wa dunya (roughly, “religion and the world”). In his classic work Kitab al-siyasa al-shar ciyya, the Hanbali theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), echoing an earlier predecessor Ibn Batta (d. 997), would stress that the exercise of political power is a form of religiosity by means of which a human being may draw closer to God.

It is true the Sunnis have maintained that the caliphate was a political, not a religious office (p. 166), but the Shi’a have steadfastly maintained that it is both. On p. 196, the author states, “The sheikh of al-Azhar can issue a fetwa that is binding for all Sunni Muslims.” This is not true of course; a fetwa (“legal opinion”) by definition is nonbinding. The Shari’a is most categorically not a “legal methodology” (p. 169); contrary to what Tibi says, it is [canon] law itself. Usul al-fiqh, literally “the sources of law,” represents rather the methodology of law. Sadly, on the basis of such and other inaccuracies, Tibi himself could be accused of “a poor awareness of historical records” (p. 174), an accusation he hurls at the fundamentalists.

Tibi’s alarm at the rise of religious fundamentalism, particularly of the Islamic kind, is not, of course, entirely misplaced. Though the phenomenon remains at present a minor one, moderate Muslims everywhere, who still substantially outnumber the militants (as even Tibi admits, pp. 101–102), and anxious Islam-watchers on the international scene are viscerally afraid of its growth. One must beware of the danger of lapsing into gross generalization and essentialism about Islamic resurgence and its manifestations. There is much about this resurgence that could lead to far-reaching, positive effects. For the world’s Muslims, the increasing relevance of Islam in both their private and public lives has instigated a discourse about how this relevance can be incorporated into modern lives. Islamic resurgence in some quarters is generating reformist discourse, encouraging moral housecleaning, and prompting negotiations with the West; Khatami’s Iran readily comes to mind as an example. Tibi’s picture of an unregenerate, harshly uncompromising political Islam is only one aspect of a multifaceted phenomenon. Few people will want to quarrel with Tibi that the murderous wrath of religious fundamentalism whether expressed by Algerian Muslim militants, Jewish–Zionist settlers in Israel/Palestine, those American Christian pro–lifers who bomb abortion clinics, or Hindu extremists, is inherently
inimical to civil society. Few people will also quarrel with Tibi that a new world order must be predicated on a respect for human rights and an international moral code. I wish, however, that he had affixed to his world order the qualifier consensual, for such a world order, to enjoy any kind of legitimacy, must be based on consensus. The onus of creating a new world order that is acceptable to all segments of humanity must not mainly rest on the inhabitants of the world of Islam, as Tibi envisages. It is rather high-handed of Tibi to suggest that the post-Reformation Western experience of a rupture between religion and politics must be adopted by all; is there really no room for *a modus vivendi* here? The recent Clinton “affair” might have already awakened a popular desire in the United States, for example, to see more of a concern for ethics in the public domain, perhaps even a revival of old-fashioned religious morality and accountability. The logistics of arriving at a consensual world order will not be easy, but if this new world order is to be expressive of the best of democratic ideals, then all sides must at the very least be given an equal, respectful hearing.

—Asma Afsaruddin

THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

Mahmood Monshipouri: *Islamism, Secularism, and Human Rights in the Middle East*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998. Pp. xi, 258. $53.00.)

This volume cites the “enormous momentum” achieved in the twentieth century toward the goals of democratic development and human rights, and seeks to understand how the region known as the Middle East can be judged a part of this experience. More fundamentally, the author seeks to describe the continuing debate between what he identifies as the secular rationalists on the one side, and the Islamists on the other. Monshipouri accepts as given the traditional character of the Muslim world and focuses attention on the long struggle between those within it who believe the goals of democratic development can be gained without tampering with the Islamic tradition, and those who argue the need to modify Islamic practices in order to reconcile religious experience with the eclecticism found in the global environment. Noting the tendency to equate democratic development and human rights with forms of westernization, the author seeks to convince the reader that Islam is neither antithetical nor opposed to expanding democratic rights, but that Muslims cannot separate themselves from their essential genius without doing mortal harm to a peculiar way of life. In effect, the burden of this volume is a purported analysis of the progress Muslims have made in defining their lifeways in language that is at once more agreeable to their profession of faith, and at the same time, more embracing of principles, values, and behaviors that at first glance may appear at variance with the community of believers.