

A Response to Vincent Cornell's "Reasons Public and Divine: Liberal Democracy, Shari'a Fundamentalism, and the Epistemological Crisis of Islam"

By Brett T. Wilmot, Ph.D., Villanova University

In "Reasons Public and Divine: Liberal Democracy, Shari'a Fundamentalism, and the Epistemological Crisis of Islam," Vincent Cornell frames the challenges facing those working to reconcile Islam and liberal democracy. In particular, he focuses on the strategies pursued by Sherman Jackson, Imam Fesial Abdul Rauf, and Tariq Ramadan, each of whom offers a slightly different take on the relationship between Islam and liberal democracy. These efforts are contrasted with what Cornell refers to as "Shari'a fundamentalism," an account of Islam, particularly the role of Shari'a law, that is deeply hostile to the values of liberal democracy. Osama bin Laden and Sayyid Qutb provide clear examples of this expression of Islam, in which the very essence of democracy as self-rule is rejected as incompatible with respect for divine authority. In the words of bin Laden, Americans "choose to invent their own laws as they will and desire," this as opposed to "ruling by the *sharia* of God" (23). The problem, as Cornell sees it, is that Islam is facing an "epistemological crisis" along the lines described by Alasdair MacIntyre. Such a crisis arises "when a tradition of inquiry fails to make progress by its original standards of rationality" (29), and the solution MacIntyre describes involves "develop[ing] new resources and frameworks for the tradition under pressure" by appropriating from the tradition(s) that generated the crisis in the first place. In the present case, the problem arises in the confrontation of Islam with "the pressures of globalization and secular liberalism" (29). According to Cornell, Shari'a fundamentalism's response to this crisis, rather than pursuing an approach to the Islamic tradition that seeks a *rapprochement* with the liberal tradition, has been

to adopt a “siege mentality, a circling of the wagons designed to protect the integrity of the Islamic order from outside influences” (33).

The real problem that Cornell addresses, however, isn't so much the failure of Shari'a fundamentalism to respond adequately to the epistemological crisis of Islam (unlikely, given that Muslim fundamentalists frame the encounter in terms of a “clash of civilizations ... a conflict of values between Islam and the West” [30-31]) but rather what he takes to be the relative failure on the part of those more moderate voices represented by Jackson, Abdul Rauf, and Ramadan. While each in his own way represents a more moderate position in terms of the integration of Islam and liberal democracy, Cornell suggests that each ultimately falls short of reconciling the demands on Muslims made by Islamic tradition and citizenship in liberal democracies.

Jackson, Abdul Rauf, and Ramadan should be recognized for attempting to resolve the epistemological crisis of Islam by developing new resources and frameworks for Islamic tradition.... However, the inconsistencies of their arguments reveal that there is still some distance to go before the epistemological crisis can be resolved.... [T]he liberal democratic notion of public reason remains a major obstacle in this process. (45)

Cornell's diagnosis is that “the problem of public reason for contemporary Muslims is grounded in the failure of mainstream Islamic thought to agree on a warranted notion of unsupervised reason or of a ‘democratic intellect’ such as that proposed by John Locke” (45).

In responding to Cornell's very thoughtful chapter, I am limited in my ability to evaluate the details about Islamic tradition he discusses, whether in terms of the Shari'a fundamentalism of Osama bin Laden and Sayyid Qutb, on the one hand, or the more moderate voices of Jackson,

Abdul Rauf, and Ramadan, on the other. Where I would like to focus my comments is on some of the assumptions Cornell makes about the liberal tradition itself. My comments here are meant to be suggestive, and I can do no more, given the limits of space, than introduce my concerns. Given Cornell's account of the various Islamic thinkers he discusses, I suspect that the idea of an epistemological crisis for the Islamic tradition in its encounter with liberal democracy is a helpful approach, one that I have found very instructive. I wonder, though, about the characterization of public reason in Rawlsian terms that Cornell assumes for his discussion. The presumption seems to be that Rawls's account of public reason in the context of political liberalism sets the standard that must be met by the various Islamic scholars Cornell evaluates. What appears to be required for a comprehensive doctrine to be considered reasonable and rational in the context of liberal democracy is that it be capable of "conceiv[ing] of public reason without an overarching authority ... that can legitimize the consensus of public reason" (45). Even for the moderate defenders of Islamic tradition, "the exercise of public reason must be supervised" (45). The problem with this is that "supervised reason may all too easily become paternalism, authoritarianism, or at worst, totalitarianism" (45). In essence, the problem for all of these thinkers on Cornell's account is that they remain constrained by an account of religious authority that is incompatible with the idea of public reason that defines liberal democracy, at least according to Rawls.

To be sure, the threats of paternalism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism are not minor concerns, but contemporary expressions of liberalism can appear somewhat shrill at times in their warnings against religion, particularly in its more conservative forms. I wonder whether Cornell has overlooked—or at least minimized—ongoing disputes about the liberal tradition itself that are relevant to this discussion. Rawls's account of public reason, while enormously

influential, remains somewhat controversial in terms of what it seems to require of citizens, particularly those who are adherents of non-liberal comprehensive doctrines. While Cornell references Jeffrey Stout's book, *Democracy and Tradition* (2003), it's not clear that Cornell's discussion of public reason takes full account of the ways in which Stout challenges the Rawlsian model in order to present an alternative that is more congenial to religion given various criticisms raised by representatives of both the Protestant and Catholic traditions (including by MacIntyre, from whom Cornell borrows the theme of "epistemological crisis"). In light of a number of sophisticated criticisms of the Rawlsian account of public reason required by liberal democracy, I find myself wondering whether the liberal tradition in its relationship to religious traditions and beliefs isn't itself confronting something of an epistemological crisis, as evidenced in part by Stout's work.¹ If so, then while it may indeed be the case that challenges remain for the Islamic tradition insofar as its representatives seek a *rapprochement* with liberal democracy, it may also be the case that the liberal tradition itself requires renewed attention to its approach to religious traditions and beliefs. And it may turn out that Rawls, for all of his influence, may not be the most helpful interlocutor.

To reiterate, my comments here are meant to be suggestive, as seems appropriate for this forum. In raising concerns about the Rawlsian account of public reason and its implications for understanding the relationship between religion and liberal democracy, I don't mean to suggest that Cornell hasn't provided a very insightful analysis of recent efforts by a range of Muslim intellectuals to reconcile Islam and liberal democracy (though I must leave it to those with far more expertise on these matters than I to render judgment on its adequacy). My observations are

¹ I'm thinking in particular of work by Nicholas Wolterstorff—e.g., in *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge, 1996) and *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), as well as numerous other chapters and articles—and Christopher Eberle's *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics* (Cambridge, 2002); concerns raised by Robert George in "Public Morality, Public Reason" (*First Things*, Nov. 2006) are also apropos.

aimed at taking up the conversation on the other side of Cornell's accomplishments here by suggesting that work remains to be done from the perspective of the liberal tradition itself in terms of its treatment of religious traditions, Islamic or otherwise.