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Laina Farhat-Holzman

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Book Reviews

Laina Farhat-Holzman *God's Law or Man's Law: The Fundamentalist Challenge to Secular Rule*

Times Publishing Group, Aptos, 2002

Laina Farhat-Holzman *Strange Birds from Zoroaster's Nest, Revised Edition*

None The Less Press, Lenexa, 2003

Laina Farhat-Holzman *How Do You Know That?: A Guide to Critical Thinking about Global Issues*

The Center for Sustainable Business Practices, Kalamazoo, 2011

Laina Farhat-Holzman *World Changes: Ten Inventions That Changed Everything*

The Center for Sustainable Business Practices, Kalamazoo, 2012.

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Laina Farhat-Holzman is a prolific author, the copious extent of whose production challenges the reader who is ambitious enough to go below any one work to grasp the larger issues and positions she presents. The four books that concern us now are: 1) *Strange Birds from Zoroaster's Nest* (Revised Edition), 2) *God's Law or Man's Law: The Fundamentalist Challenge to Secular Rule*, 3) *How Do You Know That: A Guide to Critical Thinking about Global Issues*, and 4) *World Changes: Ten Inventions That Changed Everything*. When read together they not only exemplify the value of taking a more expansive perspective of Farhat-Holzman's work but also give rise to a hope that Farhat-Holtzman herself will continue her intellectual journey to its compelling conclusion.

Strange Birds from Zoroaster's Nest (Revised Edition) was originally published in 2000. It is a gem of a work. There certainly are a handful of other books that can serve as more extensive introductions to Zoroaster and Zoroastrian thought, such as *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* by Jenny Rose or *In Search of Zarathustra* by Paul Kriwaczek. However, one of the enticing uniqueness's of *Strange Birds from Zoroaster's Nest* is precisely the pithy, clear and sensitive way it goes directly to the heart of Zoroaster's teaching. It focuses in on Zoroaster's major foundational contribution to all the world's later major religions: namely his transformation of the understanding of religion from that of "paying off evil forces with sacrifices", what the writer calls "a protection racket", to a process of deep self-awareness and deliberate ethical behavior". (Farhat-Holzman, 2003, 14)

It was Karl Jaspers who most prominently asserted the idea of a transformational age of religion: an age that ushered in both a new sense of moral understanding, and a new sense of the role of the individual in the search for that morality. Jaspers, who called the period

between approximately 800 and 200 B.C.E. the “axial age”, saw this period as the age during which the spiritual understanding of humanity made a major rotational shift in a series of parallel but largely independent religious emergences. These included the teachings of Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed.

Farhat-Holzman, using more recent chronological evidence, makes the case that, in fact, it was Zoroaster who was the founding influence on all these religions. She asserts the need to give him a far greater recognition for being the “founding father” of morality-based religion per se, through the direct influence of Zoroastrianism on the other Faiths. To support this position, Farhat-Holzman follows the train of Zoroastrian belief through Judaism, Christianity and Islam as it progressed, respectively, from its origins as a conceived battle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman (Zoroastrianism) to becoming the battle between fulfilling or not fulfilling God’s word (Judaism), to becoming the battle between God and Satan (Christianity), then the battle between Believer and Non-Believer (Islam) and, eventually, arriving at the abstract philosophically choice between good and evil.

Farhat-Holzman’s advocacy for recognition of Zoroaster’s positive historic role, however, is counter-balanced by her less than positive portrayal of the life cycle of the religion per se. This includes her description of the establishment of Zoroastrianism as the official religion of the Sassanian Empire, and the increasing domination of its priests, rituals and dogmas. Eventually Zoroastrianism came into conflict with rising Islam, and was subsequently persecuted by it. Today Zoroastrianism’s relatively few remaining adherents are mainly the generally prosperous Parsees of India. The ultimate irony is the accompanying survival of the seemingly misguided dogmatic thinking of its priests who today, though the community faces increasing diminution in numbers because of intermarriage, insist that only the offspring of both a Zoroastrian mother and father can be recognized as a member of the Faith.

Farhat-Holzman’s *God’s Law or Man’s Law, The Fundamentalist Challenge to Secular Rule* was published between the original publication of *Strange Birds from Zoroaster’s Nest* and the present second edition. It is important in and of itself, but also to our understanding some of the additional material Farhat-Holzman has added to the second edition. That new material work goes beyond specifically discussing Zoroastrianism to bringing in present day fundamentalist Islam and its increasing conflict with almost every expression of an globalizing world, religious and non- religious, that fundamentalist Islam sees as evil personified.

In *God’s Law or Man’s Law*, the author looks at “good” and “evil” today as basically a struggle between rationality and science on one side and fundamentalist religious doctrines and cults on the other.

She recognizes that these fundamentalists do not take their cues from the nobler thoughts of the great religious thinkers of the past. Rather they are the servants of present-day power-

hungry leaders who feed upon the sense of threatened loss of identity felt by large numbers of people suffering under the disorientations of the modern world. I will refrain from outlining the specific material Farhat-Holzman presents because her book is an easy and quick read. It is a short but broad coverage of most of the major present day religious groups and doctrines in conflict with modern progressive thought and practices.

As such, it is an inviting resource for dialogue and debate on how fundamentalist religions distort not only humanist oriented rationality but also the most meaningful contributions of religion to civilization. As the author herself says: “I am not attacking the founders of the world’s great religions.... the institutions that followed these prophets are to blame. Religions take on a life of their own, and for all the steps forward in morality and ethics that come with each new religion, dreadful cultural behaviors return and somehow become enshrined.” (106)

World Changes: Ten Inventions That Changed Everything is the author’s succinct demonstration of the means by which rational thought and empirically based decision-making made, on ten occasions, transformational changes to a world filled with superstition and dogma. This book and the fourth work under discussion, *How Do You Know*, are basically short works specifically designed to be resources for academic courses. The first book identifies ten critical inventions: fire, agriculture, water technologies, printing press, telescope, communications, transport, energy, the computer and future transformative science – i.e., space travel and brain science, as her candidates for the ten human inventions that have most qualitatively changed human life. As a short teaching resource it offers a stimulating pre-packaged presentation of facts ideal for discussion and debate. However, unlike the other three works, it does not particularly focus on the role of religion in today’s world. I have included it, however, because I feel it represents an important piece in the puzzle of understanding and appreciating the larger picture Farhat-Holzman’s intellectual endeavors.

How Do You Know That? focuses on the need for critical thinking, particularly on issues that Farhat-Holzman feels strongly about. These include religion and religious fundamentalism, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran, all of them situations that she feels we “got wrong”. Like *World Changes: Ten Inventions That Changed Everything*, it is really designed as an instructional tool and does not provide any “right” answers.

What it does certainly demonstrates is how many ways we can go wrong, regardless of whether the intent is benevolent (e.g. Paul Ehrlich wrongly warning we would run out of oil by the end of the twentieth century) or aggressive (e.g. George Bush going into Iraq). The “we” here is mostly the United States and this is certainly not a book for those who believe that America is always right. Rather it is a book to prick the balloon of delusion that seems to so easily affect policy makers, especially those who come to situations with already well developed understandings and who resist ever taking a look at the quality of their information before beginning to speculate on what it means.

The author has written many focused short works. While many of these often reference each other, they are not openly presented as parts of any larger grand thesis and are thus easily thought of as separate intellectual products. I, however, do not see matters this way. I think that without looking at the larger picture which these works, as a collective, portray, one misses the power of the larger argument as well as a possible critique as to what is still missing. So, with the caveat that I am speaking for my own conclusions and not the authors, I suggest the following synthesis:

Farhat-Holzman is at her core a scholar of civilization and therefore putting her works in the context of the phenomenon of civilization may be the best way to fully appreciate them. Civilizations wax and wane. Civilizations spring to birth, display energetic expansion, consolidate in maturity, eventually give way to the encumbrances of vested interests and, after overextending themselves, grow feeble and then die – usually at the hands of a lethal challenge – whether natural or human. It should not surprise us therefore that this cycle is also true of the role religion plays in the rise and fall of the civilizations with which they are associated. The problem is that it is one thing to objectively analyze the rise and fall of a past civilization and yet another thing to have to emotionally experience the fall of your own civilization in your own time and place.

Dr. Farhat-Holzman understands just how great have been the achievement of Western Civilization, and just how little those who want to bring it to an end understand of its greatness. She also expresses her simmering disappointment, verging on anger, at those of its purported leaders who so often seem even less informed and more foolish than their adversaries. I suspect that Thucydides, when he wrote the Peloponnesian War while in exile from his home state of Athens, felt somewhat the same as he watched Athens' mistakes in its war with Sparta. A more recent example might be Milovan Djilas, the close associate of Marshal Tito, who, while in prison for his freethinking, produced prolific commentaries on the degeneration of the communism of the times and the likely sad fate that faced Yugoslavia in the coming future. In both cases, the fact that each of the commentators had been isolated from active engagement in their societies gave them a degree of added objectivity and separation from the unfolding tragedy of their times.

In contrast, Dr. Farhat-Holzman is passionately concerned and involved in today's world and she has a clarion message she wishes to give. That message appears to be that Western Civilization has been the major advancer of humanity in the last five hundred years. Moreover, that advancement has been clearly science and technology-driven. And, while there is a legitimate question to ask as to who paid for, and who benefitted by, this progress, if you believe in the advancement of civilization you have to also ask: who else would have done it better or even could have done it at all?

At the same time, Dr. Farhat-Holzman's message of the need for a "frank accounting" of who has contributed what to human civilization, while certainly relatively positive to the Western, does recognize that critical elements of the West's social and philosophical roots

come from a very different more distant past, when, as she sees it, religious certitude rather than critical thinking, (which she describes as “a logical train of thought, challenging assumptions and coming to a measured conclusion”; 2011, 2), determined the reigning cultural beliefs. On the other hand, she, herself, presents powerful evidence that today such critical thinking is becoming harder and rarer, given the nature of overwhelming and constantly changing information, and the domination of opinion by narrow disciplinary specialists.

In the end, I hope the time will come, the sooner the better, when Farhat-Holzman will write a synthesis of her independent works and meld her varied observations and conclusions into something greater than the sum of the parts. Personally, I suspect what is holding this back is her reluctance to, like Thucydides and Djilas, come to terms with the evidence that she is studying: the unraveling of her own present civilization, a civilization that seems incapable of meeting even the most obvious and lethal of planetary challenges, such as atomic weapons, global warming and catastrophic environmental degradation.

In this respect, *How Do You Know That*, the work that on the surface seems the least relevant to the others, may actually hold the key. Farhat-Holzman describes well the challenges fundamentalism presents to solving problems through critical thinking. But *How Do You Know That* is replete with examples showing that official and unofficial Western, and especially American, policy and practices are increasingly anything but well informed or well thought out.

Though still a technological powerhouse, today’s America is not the gathering place of great minds in terms of either wisdom or critical thinking. Rather it is dominated by ideological, dogma bound “priests” and “friars” of the established “Church of the Moneyed, the Powerful and the Special Interests.” We may call them by other names such as economists, political scientists, policy analysts, consultant, pundits, but in the end we worship at their feet and repeatedly pay for their usually wrong divinations.

Is there really that much difference between these pundits of neo-liberal western corporate capitalism and those priests of Zoroastrianism who over time forgot the deep morality behind Zoroaster’s message and replaced it with self-enriching rituals?

The Roman Empire always had barbarians on its borders. Its problems arose when, because of its internal rot, it could no longer defend itself against them. Is our situation today vis-à-vis fundamentalism really that different from Rome in its decline? And if it isn’t, then don’t we have to come to the conclusion that our reigning western civilization and its religion are beyond saving and are mere shells waiting to be blow over by the rising wind of a yet to be recognized replacement?

Of course, maybe I am misreading the message that comes from an encompassing reading of these books. Maybe science and critical thinking can still save the day. But whether I am right or wrong, these books have proven provocative to read and I certainly await Dr. Farhat-Holzman’s next work to clarify the thoughts they have raised in my mind.