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Activism and Reform in Islam

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON

One legacy of the murderous attacks of September 2001 is an understandable tendency for the United States media to dwell on conservative and especially radical and extremist groups of Muslims to the virtual exclusion of moderate, centrist Muslims. Although more than 1 billion Muslims inhabit the earth, with the vast majority living outside the Middle East, the average American newspaper reader or television viewer is offered little more than a caricature of Islam. Like all caricatures, this one evokes familiar traits (Middle Eastern origins) and exaggerates particular actions (violence).

Although President George W. Bush has assiduously avoided casting Muslims and their religion as the enemy, many media experts and opinion leaders have shown no such reticence. Thus, the Reverend Franklin Graham, the son of evangelist Billy Graham, has argued that the basic problem is Islam, particularly the fact that it is a “violent religion.” In a similar vein, a rash of media experts has argued—or simply presumed—that Islamist movements (political movements that seek to promote Islamic values and laws) pose a profound threat to the West and its values. If such claims are correct, then rough

waters lay ahead for the United States and the world of Islam because many millions of Muslims actively support these movements—and not Al Qaeda, which comprises but a few thousand members.

Casting Islam as inherently violent and anti-Western spawns suspicion of any organized political activity by Muslims. These activities are taken, ipso facto, to be potentially emblematic of conspiratorial plotting against the welfare and safety of the United States. Whether one approves of or censures Attorney General John Ashcroft’s zealous pursuit of Muslim immigrants and aliens, the erosion of Muslims’ legal and civil rights in the United States has been widely noted in the Muslim world and often adduced as evidence of hostility to Islam. In this sense alone, the stereotyping of Muslims has played into the hands of America’s enemies in the Muslim world.

Yet, generalizing about Islam and its adherents is no more useful than attempting to capture all Americans in a caricature. Largely missing from American discussions about Islam is any appreciation of the debates within Islam and the widely variant interpretations by Muslims of their own religion. Beyond the core belief shared by all Muslims that there is only one God and Muhammad was the messenger of God, there are many “Islams,” depending on locale, education, custom, politics, and personal attitudes. These variations go well beyond sectarian divisions between Sunnis, who constitute almost 90 percent of all Muslims, and the various Shiite sects that make up the remainder.¹

Tensions have historically existed within Islam between mainstream moderate strains and more activist interpretations. The increase in Muslim activism in recent decades is driven by many factors. First, influential radical thinkers have insisted that Muslims must go beyond the spiritual *jihad* (the struggle to be a good Muslim); they urge Mus-

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¹While all Muslims share the core belief that there is only one God, and Muhammad was his messenger, the Sunni and Shiite sects differ especially on the question of succession following the death of Muhammad. Although the majority Sunnis chose Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s best friend and early convert to Islam, as his successor, the Shia advocated Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. Doctrinal and ritual differences continue to divide the two sects.

lims to actively assert their faith and their values, even with violence. Second, growth in literacy and global communications has made Muslims more conscious of being part of a broader Islamic community. Third, much of the Muslim world, not least the Arab countries, is afflicted with failed states and corrupt regimes. Islamic activism is promoted as a cure to this malaise. Fourth, America evokes Muslim resentment because it supports corrupt Muslim regimes and because of its pro-Israel bias in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Fifth, although America certainly has permanent enemies in the Muslim world, extensive scientific polling demonstrates that most Muslims do not hate American values or freedoms.²

The popular resonance that purveyors of terrorism may enjoy in the Muslim world thus partly reflects animosity toward specific United States policies rather than a rejection of freedom or capitalism. Osama bin Laden's potent exploitation of popular resentment following September 11, especially with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, illustrates that what is at stake is not simply defeating evil but facing the obvious fact that United States policies may unintentionally stoke support for terrorists.

ISLAM AND THE WEST

The diversity of perspectives found among twenty-first-century Muslims was anticipated in the ideas of three early Islamic revivalists: Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Muhammad Rashid Rida. These famous late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century personalities grappled with questions of modernity and relations with the West and came to disparate conclusions. Al-Afghani and his protégé, Abduh, were inclined to meld Western ideas and institutions with Muslim values and society, whereas Rida emphasized Muslim authenticity and counseled a more conservative, more "fundamentalist" interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim. Thus, contemporary Muslim modernists in Egypt, for example, are more likely to revere al-Afghani than Rida. (The al-Afghani Society, which brings together hundreds of Egyptian intellectuals and professionals, meets periodically in Cairo.)

The conservative thought of Rida strongly influenced the schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood (usually referred to as the Ikhwan or "The Brethren") in Port Said,

Egypt in 1928. The Ikhwan remains committed to a Muslim society in which the law of the land is religious law (*sharia*). Although the Ikhwan has been outlawed in Egypt for nearly 50 years, it has sustained an impressive following in the country, especially among middle-class professionals and merchants. For the past two decades, the Ikhwan has been the dominant element in Egypt's political opposition. Extended periods of government-Ikhwan coexistence are punctuated by repression and arrests, especially during parliamentary elections. Yet, like many Muslim political movements, the Ikhwan has changed over time. In contrast to the ideas of its founder, who argued that there could be only one party—the party of God (Hizballah)—the Ikhwan has sought a place in a pluralist political system in which it can compete with political parties. Jealous of its potential base in society, the Egyptian government has refused to legalize the Ikhwan or permit it to formally organize as a political party.

The Ikhwan has branches, especially throughout the Arab world, but is not the only model for Muslim social or political organization in the Middle East. In Turkey, the Nur movement, the country's largest social movement, is inspired by the writing of Said Nursi (1876–1920), a Kurdish Turk who left behind an extensive commentary on Islam and the Koran. Nursi's thought exhibits a unique Turkish flavor. While Nursi's followers are suspicious of Western values, especially democracy, and emphasize community solidarity based on Muslim values, they coexist peacefully with the state and forswear political engagement and violence. Like many social movements in Islam, they promote the spread of Islamic values in society; they do not want to supplant the state, or prescribe religious law for society.

The fervency of today's Islamic movements reflects underlying structural and ideological shifts. In particular, the failure of the secular state to deliver on its promises of development, jobs, and prosperity—not to mention freedom—is taken as proof of the bankruptcy of secular nationalist ideologies. If the movements have a core slogan, it is that "Islam is the answer" (*Islam huwwa al-hal*). In some tragic instances, such as the repressively puritanical Taliban in Afghanistan, little more than a slogan and a collection of village-based mores were offered to deal with vexing problems of reconstruction and survival. In other cases, such as on the Arabian Peninsula and in Southeast Asia, considerable thought has been given to Islamic answers, especially in the areas of business and finance. Thus, one

²The most important recent poll of Muslim attitudes, covering eight Muslim states, was carried out in 2002 by Zogby International. A summary is available at <<http://www.zogby.com/features/features.dbm?ID=141>>.

encounters a large collection of work on interest-free banking (usury is prohibited by Islam).

In terms of social origins, the movements are a phenomenon that crosses class lines. While the leading figures in these movements are often drawn from traditional elites, the constituency is generally the emerging provincial middle class and the newly literate lower classes that are frustrated by the absence of decent jobs and opportunity. In short, it comprises those segments of society that are victims rather than beneficiaries of modernization. Religious ideals become a refuge as well as an answer to economic marginalization and social decay.

The spread of public education and literacy, and the proliferation of information about the world through the modern news media, do not lead to the triumph of any particular interpretation of Islam, but to a growing tendency for Muslims to see themselves as part of a broader global community. Whether individual Muslims are hostile to the West (or the United States) may have less to do with dissonant values than with whether Western or United States policies

are seen as congenial or hostile to Muslims. In this sense, President Bush's persistent claim that

"they" (referring to Al Qaeda) "hate our freedom" is less compelling than the fact that United States policies, especially in the Middle East, are widely condemned by Muslims, even by those Muslims who express considerable respect for American values and products.

COMMANDING GOOD, FORBIDDING WRONG

A persistent tension in Muslim societies exists between the quiet, even quietist, practice of the faith and a more activist application that includes the imposition of religious values. This is represented by the variant interpretations of the Koranic injunction that many Muslims view as a marker of their religion: the injunction to command good and forbid wrong (*'amr bil ma'rouf wa nahy al-munkar*). At the core of the doctrine are questions about the scope of individual freedom, tolerance, personal responsibility, and activism. If every Muslim is an agent of God, how zealously and intrusively must that agency be exercised? What is the responsibility of a Muslim to instill good behavior and stop bad behavior? This is a core debate among Muslim theologians. The shadow of Abu Hamid al-Ghaz-

zali, the Persian-born medieval *faqih* (or legal authority) and philosopher, often lurks in the debate. Al-Ghazzali's seminal *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya 'ulum al-din)*, among his other important works, remains a key text in serious discussions about the doctrine. While al-Ghazzali and other major thinkers avoided expansive interpretations of the doctrine, the same may not be said for some contemporary Muslim movements that often urge the imposition of conservative Muslim values.

In recent decades, radical Muslim neo-Salafi movements have combined a commitment to first principles with social conservatism and activism. In short, these movements seek a religious foundation modeled on a perfect, reproducible past. The term Salafi refers to *al-Salaf*, or the ancestors, which usually means the leading virtuous figures of Islam's early history. The Salafi movements do not form a structurally unified phenomenon, and wide differences mark their strategies and even their ultimate goals. Indeed, variation within the Salafi orientation is extensive, and dozens of groups can be found

across the Middle East. While Al Qaeda is certainly part of the neo-Salafi phenomenon, its terrorist tac-

tics distinguish it from the majority of such groups, which emphasize the propagation of faith and practice rather than the promotion of violence.

Arguably, the single most important contribution to radical activism, especially in Arab world, is the writing of Sayyid Qutb, who was hanged in 1966 by Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser less for his actions than his ideas. Qutb was inspired by the work of the late Mawlana Mawdudi, the founder of Jamaat al-Islami, still Pakistan's leading Islamist party. Qutb was not an *alim*, or religious scholar, by training, and it is noteworthy that his analysis has a sharp anticlerical content. Like Qutb, many of the groups inspired by his work are decidedly anticlerical in orientation because they view Muslim clerics as accomplices and functionaries of the state. (This is in sharp contrast to Shiite Iran and, for that matter, leading Shiite parties such as Hizballah in Lebanon, where clerics have played leading roles.)

The central concept of Qutb's work is *jahiliyya*, which connects pre-Islamic idolatry, polygamy, ignorance, and corruption with the conditions of contemporary Egypt. Qutb argues that present-day Egypt parallels the period of ignorance 14 centuries ago that

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preceded the revelation of God's words to the Prophet Muhammad. His most famous and influential book is *Ma'alim fil Tariq (Milestones)*, a highly readable political tract that continues to attract a wide audience in the Muslim world. Qutb's ideas resonate with Muslims today not only because he roots his analysis in a familiar religious context, but also because his discussions of corruption and decay capture the political reality in which many Muslims find themselves.

For Qutb, social criticism is insufficient. He urges activism. It is not enough to pursue the "greater jihad" (*jihad akbar*), the continual individual struggle of all Muslims to perfect their observance of God's law and overcome carnal and other mundane temptations. Instead, Muslims must act. He draws explicitly on Ibn Taymiyyah, the thirteenth-century scholar who counseled action against oppression (in contrast to the traditional view, traced to al-Ghazzali, that one night of *fitna*, or chaos, is worse than 10 years of dictatorship). If Qutb's focus was his own country of Egypt, men like Osama bin Laden have broadened the scope of action by concluding that the jahiliyya regimes are kept in power by the West in general, and by the United States in particular.

References to Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* usually exaggerate the unity of Muslims as a global community, but it is apt to note that the neo-Salafi movements have been avid readers of Huntington. For example, in a 1995 interview with the author, the Turkish Islamist Mustafa Özel shared his worldview of civilizations, including "American civilization" (as he defined it), which he said was doomed to decline as Islamic and Chinese civilizations rose. Whether moderate or more radical, leading Muslim thinkers and activists share the hardly comforting conviction that the "clash of civilizations" is the paradigm that shapes United States foreign policy.

REFORMIST VOICES

Far less known in the West are a variety of reformist thinkers who argue that the encounter between Islam and modernity requires a renewal of Islam. While these thinkers do not represent a single school of thought, they share an emphasis on understanding Islam in a modern context as though the Koran were revealed yesterday, instead of more than 14 centuries ago. Rather than viewing al-Salaf as exemplars for modern life, they prefer a metaphorical or a historically specific appreciation of Islam. These thinkers include, among others, the Iranians Abdel Karim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar; the Egyptians Hassan Hanafi, Gamal al-Banna,

and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd; the Syrian Muhammad Shahrour; and the United States-based Abdullahi an-Naim and Khaled Abou el-Fadl.

These Muslim intellectuals are not working to marginalize or supplant religion but to revitalize it; several emphasize themes of freedom, including the freedom for others not to believe and freedom for women. These are thinkers who are striving to reform Islam from within. They emphasize the need to critically engage Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and doctrines (*al-sunna*) and understand that light comes from the sources of darkness (*laa yantashour el huda ila men haythoo intashara el zalam*).

Their constituencies vary. Some, such as Iran's Soroush, have won an extensive following in their home country and are well known. Others, such as Shahrour, have found a niche among educated professionals in several countries. Some are known primarily in sympathetic intellectual circles, but have not attained a broad readership. In comparison to the social movements discussed earlier, the overall influence of these reformists at the popular level is limited. With the exception of the Iranian reformists, their importance lies in their roles as pathbreakers and initiators of ideas and debates.

In contrast to the Salafis, who generally conceive of Islam as isolated from other religions, many modern reformists argue that Islam has to be understood both in terms of its own history and that of the West. Soroush, for example, argues that we cannot understand our own religion except with reference to other civilizations.

While the reformists emphasize that Muhammad was the final and greatest prophet, the "seal of the prophets" (*khatam al-nabiyyin*), they insist that this does not mean that our understanding of Islam is not subject to constant interpretation. Thus, Shahrour asserts, "Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations of Islam, and so is Christianity, which is a series of interpretations of Christianity." There is no seal of the commentators.

The Sunni renewal thinkers are often especially critical of the religious establishment in Islam for stifling interpretation and embedding Islam in stale and calcified thinking. They point to the bodies of scholarship that have grown up around the four great schools of law (*mathahib*) in Sunni Islam as part of the problem facing Muslims today, and there is strong sentiment to reduce and eventually eliminate their influence. Of course, the interpretations that the various schools of law have accumulated over the centuries are themselves historically specific. The pointed comments of Abou el-Fadl in the

March 19, 2002 *Boston Review* illustrate the perspective: “as Muslim intellectuals we must admit that the morality of the Qur’an exceeded the morality of its interpreters. In many ways, the Qur’anic text set moral trajectories that could not be adequately realized or even understood by the interpretive communities of the past.”

Some of the reformists are explicitly skeptical of the application of Islamic law in society, while others argue that sharia, properly understood, includes rich protections for individual freedom. Perhaps the most skeptical is an-Naim, who argues that the “public law of Shari’a is fundamentally inconsistent with the realities of modern life. This is my firm conviction as a Muslim. My only concern is to avoid the human suffering which is likely to be caused by this doomed endeavor.”³

Abu Zayd, a professor at Cairo University, was accused of apostasy in the 1990s by Salafi opponents, who argued that his writings proved he had rejected Islam. In his work Zayd emphasizes the historical quality of the seventh-century revelations as captured in the Koran: “it should follow that what was revealed in Arabic in the seventh century to Mohammad is a historical text. The historicity of the Qur’an as a text, however, does not imply that it is a human text. Only a historical text is subject to understanding and interpretation, whereas God’s words exist in a sphere beyond any human knowledge.”⁴

Abu Zayd’s neo-Salafi opponents argued that his writings denied the divine quality of the Koran. This would mean that Abu Zayd was an apostate. Therefore, his Muslim wife could not lawfully be married to him since Islamic law prohibits a person from being married to one who has rejected Islam. Citing a doctrine, *hisba*, that holds that any Muslim may take legal action if Islam is wronged, the case was taken to the civil courts in Egypt; to the astonishment of Cairo’s intellectual elite, the courts agreed with the charge. Abu Zayd is now on leave from his university post and lives abroad with his wife. Subsequently, the Egyptian government took action to curtail the application of *hisba*, but not before radical voices had won a major victory against a serious Muslim scholar.

Certainly, not all reformist thinkers applaud Abu Zayd’s methodology, but there is broad consensus on differentiating the word of God that Muslims believe was revealed to Muhammad (al-Quran), from the

book, in the sense of the accumulated interpretations of the Koran’s meaning. This is the significance of the title of Muhammad Shahrour’s book, *al-kitaab wa al-Quran*, literally “the book and the Koran.”

The reformists especially decry the tendency of many Muslims to think of their religion in terms that are so rigid that they are detoured from advancing human knowledge and the progress of Muslim societies. One commentator at a conference in Jordan in 2001 noted, citing the Internet as an example, that rather than thinking creatively, “All we ask is [whether it is] *halal* [permitted] or *haram* [forbidden] . . . before [asking] how the Internet works.”

THE ISLAMIC TAPESTRY

All Muslims are members of the *umma*, the worldwide community of believers, and all Muslims share a commitment to a monotheistic faith in which Muhammad was the chosen messenger of God. In this sense, there is a single Islam. But as we have seen, in practice there are many Islams, defined by different rituals, doctrines, and customs. The neo-Salafi movements claim to speak for Islam, but they in fact speak for one conservative interpretation of the faith that, while it persuades some Muslims, leaves many others pursuing different paths of faith. In large, complex societies such as Morocco, Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, regional, class, and local variations of the faith compete with more universal interpretations.

The reformists’ voices are part of the Islamic tapestry. Yet the reformists do not generally enjoy a broad popular base. Their work sometimes arouses the suspicion, if not the enmity, of ardently conservative Muslims and their allies in government. Even so, the reformist thinkers have not retreated and they sustain a following, especially among the intellectual class.

The tragic events of September 2001 have been accompanied by a growing polarization between the West and many of the world’s Muslims. In particular, United States policy in the Middle East, and the Bush administration’s strong tilt in favor of Israel, serve to undermine moderate voices instead of marginalizing radical voices. The climate for reformist thinking and moderation has deteriorated and, perhaps predictably, the beneficiaries have been the least conciliatory Islamist movements. Radical movements are often founded on a bed of despair, as well as a sense of threat. They proliferate in conflict and confrontation. The challenge for the United States is not to promote any particular Muslim thinker or movement, but to pursue a foreign policy that capitalizes on the inherent diversity of the *umma*. ■

³*Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

⁴Unpublished paper, “The Modernization of Islam or the Islamization of Modernity,” c. 1997.