

**The People on the Edge:  
Religious Reform and the Burden  
of the Western Muslim Intellectual**

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A haunting and powerful image in the Qur'an depicts the people who, on the day of judgment, perch on the dividing barrier between heaven and hell and engage in a conversation with the inhabitants of both worlds (Qur'an 7: 46–49). The portrayal occurs only once in the Qur'an and is vague about the ultimate fate of these "people of the edge," but they are given a generally sympathetic portrayal, and the implication is that they will end up on the safer side of the barrier.

Apocalyptic images may seem appropriate for depicting the dilemmas that face beleaguered Muslim communities in the West in the bleak post-9/11 era. Even without the rising hostility to a Muslim presence in the West, emigrant communities have faced the challenge of adapting to exogenous cultural norms and values, making it an uphill task to maintain an "authentic Muslim life."<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that the adjustments that are needed to accommodate Islam's minority status have meant that "The Islam of Muslim intellectuals in the West tends to assume a more ethereal character," and the concrete manifestations of this tendency include the advocacy of Sufism because "it is private enough to fit into the Western social order and it is public enough to remain an echo of the total Islamic order."<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, makes it "a reasonable hypothesis that Islam—or the way Muslim life is led—is likely to change a great deal in cases where religion is more or less forced into the private corner of one's life."<sup>3</sup>

For many Western Muslim intellectuals and some observers, however, this uncertain status of being "on the edge" may be an advantage. Residing securely in the paradise of modernity, prosperity, and "enlightenment," these intellectuals are also confident that they speak both to and for the rest of the Muslim community, which is seen to have been left behind in the purgatory of turmoil and darkness. As one prominent

Western Muslim intellectual puts it, “Standing with one leg in the Orient and with the other one in the Occident” permits one to “understand both worlds sufficiently well to explain them to each other.”<sup>4</sup>

As more Muslim intellectuals achieve prominence in the West, where they see their ideas and views widely propagated and discussed from Anatolia to the remote corners of Africa, they have reason to view their role with increased self-confidence. Especially in the United States, where there is an unparalleled “high concentration of Muslim elites . . . , particularly in the university system,” some have argued that we are currently witness to “a critical evaluation of religious texts not seen since at least the colonial period.”<sup>5</sup> This may have already led to a shift in the intellectual center of gravity away from traditional Muslim heartlands and toward the United States as a major “world center of Islamic learning and intellectual life and thought,” even potentially a “second Mecca.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, it is claimed, there is today

much more intellectual Islamic life in the West than in the East. More serious books on Islam are being published in English than in Arabic. . . . And since Muslim thinkers in the West can write without censorship, their production is likely to be essential for the development of Islam in the Muslim world. I think the Muslims in America and in Europe will be the leaders for the intellectual revitalization of the Muslims in the East.<sup>7</sup>

The efforts of U.S.-based Muslim intellectuals to undermine Islamic authoritarianism could warrant an “even more ambitious agenda following up on changes in Islam’s ideology with changes in leadership and religious practices.”<sup>8</sup> Much justifies these ambitions, but ambition must not be allowed to shift to illusion. To move from a valid appreciation of the increasing importance of the intellectual contributions of Western Muslims to a “wag the dog” theory that ascribes to them a leadership role in religious reform may be as misguided (and as dangerous) an illusion as the idea that creating an American colony in Iraq would be an advertisement of America’s love for democracy and an inspiration for freedom lovers throughout the Muslim world. Both illusions spring from the same quintessentially Western overconfidence, even arrogance, of which Muslim Westerners are not immune.

In this article, I argue that although Muslim intellectual activism in the West has deep historical roots and illustrious antecedents, the claims of the new emerging movements and intellectual figures to moral, intellectual, and religious leadership of the *umma* are unprecedented in their

boldness and in their pride in Western modernist credentials. Moreover, a response to the precariousness of the increasingly vulnerable Muslim presence in the West is paradoxically at the same time an attempt to present itself as the most authoritative interpretation of Islam. This article traces the historical roots of Western Muslim intellectual activism and outlines the shifts and dynamics that produced its present form and conditioned its attempts to turn its vulnerability into an asset. It shows the ways in which the claims of the major contending trends within Western Islam are novel and assesses their success in attracting support both within the West and the wider Muslim world.

I conclude that the positions that are staked by these emerging trends are legitimate and significant but that their claims for leadership are shaky and premature. These claims seem to be based on a misconception of the dynamics and sources of religious authority, which cannot be divorced from issues of identity within the religious community. Pride in being Western at a time of perceived conflict between Islam and the West becomes counterproductive unless intellectuals can contribute to resolving or at least tempering this conflict. In addition, challenging an established religious tradition requires more than merely elaborating a position intellectually. It must mobilize the deep spiritual resources of that tradition in support of the new position. The moral authority of the potential reformist is also closely linked to an ability to articulate Muslim concerns and to have the courage to challenge accepted tradition and to stand up to the powers that be.

## **A Precarious Existence**

The excessive confidence of the spokespersons of Western Islam contrasts sharply with the doubly precarious Muslim presence in the West, in terms of both the relatively hostile environment and the pressures of secular political and intellectual hegemony. In an environment where the best Muslim is the “integrated” (read “invisible”) one, Muslim self-consciousness here is a fairly recent development. It has crystallized in adverse circumstances of turmoil and conflict that make the preoccupation with survival and adaptation one of its central features. The circumstances surrounding Muslim activism and the assertion of Muslim identity in Europe and the West were largely a reaction to adverse developments either abroad or in the West. These events (the Algerian war of independence in the 1950s, Suez, Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, the Iranian revolution, the Algerian civil war in the 1990s, and the Iraq wars)

have deeply affected the psyche of Muslims living in the West and conditioned their attitudes toward their countries of residence. During the Suez crisis of 1956, for example, Algerians (and other Muslims) living in France organized protests in support of the Algerian resistance, while Arab journalists working for the BBC refused to work or resigned altogether. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Palestinian *intifada* (from 1987) brought Muslim protestors to the streets in European cities in increasing numbers, often under Islamic banners.

Events within the West also shaped the self-awareness of Muslim communities here. These included the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* and the death threats that it generated in Britain (1989),<sup>9</sup> the headscarf controversy in France (from 1989), and the war in Bosnia from 1991 to 1995. Such events sharpened the sense of Muslim identity and increased the visibility of Muslims as Muslims. Direct involvement by the United States and major European powers in the wars in Iraq (from 1990) has tested the loyalties of some Muslim citizens in these countries. Although Muslim agitation over issues like Iraq and Bosnia attracted solidarity from non-Muslim protestors (in spite of persistent Muslim complaints of insufficient support), the protests over the Rushdie affair or the headscarf bans were mostly Muslim affairs.

By the time the September 11, 2001, atrocities were perpetrated in the United States, this process of polarization and differentiation of the Muslim community from the rest of society was well advanced. The Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004, and the London bombings of July 7, 2005, helped it along. The resulting and progressive polarization of identities set Muslims apart from other immigrants as well as from the rest of their European or American compatriots, and Muslims from different backgrounds united around common causes and a shared identity. Being a Muslim became a much more salient identity than wider identities shared with other communities (such as immigrant, black, Asian, and citizen) and than narrower identities that formerly had been more meaningful for those involved (such as Punjabi, Palestinian, Malay, and Nigerian).

The emergence and crystallization of a Muslim presence in the context of these conflicts inevitably cast this "rise of Islam" in a negative light. The Rushdie death threats represented a turning point in this regard because they brought together issues that elicited serious concerns in the minds of Western intellectuals and policy makers.<sup>10</sup> Liberal and radical intellectuals who habitually supported Muslims as a disadvantaged community against perceived racism or xenophobia found it difficult to back Muslim demands in this instance. Some liberal or left-

leaning intellectuals have become vociferous critics of Islam and Muslims, often using language that is difficult to distinguish from that habitually used by right-wing thinkers.<sup>11</sup> The headscarf controversy in France erupted in the same period, which also coincided with a sharp rise in support for right-wing movements across Europe. The self-awareness of Muslims as Muslims was thus accompanied by a corresponding (usually negative) awareness of the alien presence and visibility of Muslims as a supposedly homogeneous group embracing Arabs and Africans, Asians and Turks. This tended to displace some earlier stereotypes of Asians, immigrants, or blacks with one single community.

Muslim identity and Muslim self-awareness have thus become integral to an adaptation to perceived adverse trends and threats and in turn have elicited hostile reactions from wide sections of society. For example, Muslim institutions created in Europe and the United States became targets for attacks from the media and rival lobby groups as either unrepresentative or extremist. To break out of this vicious circle, new activists have emerged to forge a new Muslim identity that can be reconciled with Western identity.

## **Euro-Islam and the “Second Mecca”**

It may be difficult in these circumstances to see in the beleaguered Muslim communities in the West a beacon of light for the wider Muslim community. But some European Muslims, while acknowledging the current crisis and the deep roots of the identity clash, struggle to point out the positive side of this dilemma. One writer traces the mythical roots of the Islam/West identity polarization even further back. Abdal-Hakim Murad seeks inspiration in symbolic depictions in art, especially in Rembrandt’s drawings of Abraham as he casts out his concubine Hagar and her son Ishmael. One drawing shows “Hagar, young and fertile, being sent forth into the wilderness at the behest of Sarah, the infant Ishmael by her side. Sarah, the indigene, the Hebrew, is portrayed as an old, infertile woman, who looks at the departing refugee from an upper window.”<sup>12</sup> That myth of expulsion is now being played in reverse:

Today, in Europe, Sarah is again old, and Hagar is again fertile. Islam is, as we would theologically expect, at the forefront of the reinvigoration of the tired demography of a continent which, in living memory, has seen terrible nightmares. Ishmael, the refugee, uncontaminated by Europe’s crimes, is now settling in Europe. He has, in fact, already be-

come Europe's most significant Other. He thus brings hope that Europe's appalling history may find an alternative path, a vision of God and society that can heal the continent's wounds.<sup>13</sup>

Although the conduct of an extremist Muslim fringe has given adequate ammunition for habitual European xenophobia, this writer adds, one should look at the positive side of this encounter. Facing vociferous demands that they should integrate, Muslims find themselves "at the centre of Europe's current debate about itself." These demands to integrate appear as problematic as they are pregnant with possibilities. The Muslims can, in redefining themselves, redefine Europe's identity at the same time: "Islam can easily define itself as another trans-national strand in the tapestry of the changing and broadening European reality."<sup>14</sup>

In defining themselves as "as an EU-wide community, with a particular moral and spiritual vocation to a largely secularised region of the world," European Muslims can easily resolve the integration dilemma and refute accusations that Islam "forbids integration, and creates a politically and socially dangerous ghetto":

The evolution of a European Islam, absolutely faithful to the religion's duties but open to the European mainstream, will also help governments, and the European parliament, to distinguish between authentic Islam, and the Islam of extreme sects and factions currently being exported by a few corners of the Islamic world.<sup>15</sup>

According to some protagonists in this drama, this distinctive "European Muslim" identity is already slowly taking shape, and it is being helped by the evolution of new institutions and attitudes. A "burgeoning European Islam" can already be observed taking its place beside African, Central Asian, or Malay Islam. And it will, these protagonists believe, resolve in a decisive way the ongoing crises of identity and problems of integration facing European Muslims.

The idea that a specifically European Islam (or Euro-Islam) is in fact desirable, necessary, and actually emerging is being propagated by advocates including the current French President Nicolas Sarkozy (who in his former status as Interior Minister called for "a French Islam and not an Islam in France"), secular Muslim intellectuals such as Bassam Tibi (Germany) and Muhammad Arkoun (France), and Islamic intellectuals and activists such as Tariq Ramadan and the leaders of various Muslim youth groups in Europe. The idea has also many natural propo-

nents in the increasing number of native European converts (or indigenous European Muslims in the Balkans) who cannot help being Muslim and European at the same time. According to its proponents, this Euro-Islam is characterized by fundamental revisions of traditional Islamic law and norms to adapt to the existence of Muslims in predominantly non-Muslim lands governed by secular, pluralistic, and democratic norms. It also exhibits a tendency toward the creation of a new “real European Islamic culture” that is dominated by new forms of “artistic expression [that] are slowly disengaging from their specifically Arab, Turkish or Indo-Pakistani antecedents, and are attempting to recreate Islamic values within national mores and cultural tastes.”<sup>16</sup>

Increasing financial independence from sources of funding in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world, the progressive institutionalization of Muslim communities in the West, and the integration of these communities and their representative institutions into wider social and political structures are among the many signs of the emergence of a vibrant and genuinely European Islam. The integration of Muslims into Europe will thus not be a “passive” act of conforming to existing norms but a positive one of “building a new Europe” that can be richer and better.<sup>17</sup>

The transition from this modest if controversial demand to adapt Islam to Europe to the more ambitious claim that the resulting synthesis could be exported back to the wider Muslim world as a superior and more modernity-friendly version of Islam was left to (who else?) North American Muslims. They are making increasingly bold claims that a more progressive version of Islam is evolving and that this evolution is indispensable to saving Muslims from themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Even so, the more modest European claim is not especially modest after all. The very concept of Euro-Islam is problematic. While the comparison to African or Asian Islam is pertinent, no one set out consciously to create an African or Asian Islam. That goal would have been considered heresy from the perspective of traditional Islamic orthodoxy. As in most other religious traditions, observance is subject to geographical and historical variations. However, none of these came as a result of a conscious strategy to adapt to local exigencies. In fact, such variations usually emerge in spite of serious attempts at faithful adherence to an original blueprint.

This point is further underlined by the impact of the current “Islamic revival,” of which the self-assertion of European Muslims is but one manifestation. Revivalism has been rolling back the idiosyncrasies and regional variations of Islamic observance in favor of a stricter con-

formity to “orthodoxy” or a more “universal” Islam.<sup>19</sup> Although many scholars complain that this pressure to conform comes from insidious Wahhabi influences that are bankrolled by Saudi oil money,<sup>20</sup> the process is more complex than that. Modernization in general, it has been argued, has favored the retreat of so-called popular Islam (which embodied these cultural variations) in favor of the “high Islam” of the text-oriented orthodox *ulama*.<sup>21</sup> Some of the proponents of Euro-Islam thus see in it the antithesis of fundamentalist revivalism,<sup>22</sup> even though the more serious contenders in the effort to fashion Euro-Islam happen to hail from the revivalist camp.

To have any chance of being a credible alternative, Euro-Islam is conscious of the need to take the religious establishment (and the more moderate revivalist trends) on board and not only in Europe. It is an escapable fact that, in this age of global reach, no Islam (or any other system of thought, for that matter) can enjoy the luxury of isolation of the premodern Muslim communities in remote African or Central and East Asian localities. Despite celebrations of their institutional and intellectual independence, proponents of Euro-Islam feel the need to enlist the help of a number of prominent religious scholars from Muslim heartlands to formulate their new rethinking of Islamic norms.<sup>23</sup> A conference that was held in London in February 2005 tried to mobilize such support for a new rethinking of Islam “for minorities,” inviting a host of *ulama* from key Muslim countries to lead the debate.<sup>24</sup> When Tariq Ramadan issued his call for suspending Islamic punishments (in an article published in *Le Monde* on April 1, 2005), he defended himself by claiming that he had secured the agreement of key traditional *ulama* to his thesis, adding that few of them backed him up in public.<sup>25</sup>

The claims of Euro-Islam center on a demand for autonomy from the wider *umma* and its perceptions and concerns. The focus is on adaptation to a specific environment and on the right to be different from other Muslims but more similar to other fellow Europeans. The implication (since even European Muslims cannot easily escape Eurocentrism) is that this new model would be somehow superior to other varieties and may one day displace them. However, the emphasis at the moment is more on autonomy than hegemony.

The more ambitious North American claims are concerned more with hegemony than autonomy. Autonomy is a starting point because the aim is to do away with the circularity of dependence on traditional religious authorities abroad and thereby overcome the limitations of tradition. Although some American Muslim intellectuals shy away from using of the “R” word,<sup>26</sup> others do not hesitate to describe their endeavor

in terms of an “Islamic reformation,”<sup>27</sup> indicating that the drive to build the “second Mecca” out of the New Jerusalem is under way.

There is nothing novel about modernizing and reformist Muslim intellectuals who use the West as a launching pad for their reformist efforts. Activists have been doing this since the days of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1837–1897). The leading Euro-Islamist, Tariq Ramadan, is himself the product of one such endeavor. His father, Said Ramadan, was a leading figure in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and moved to Switzerland in the 1950s to escape persecution in his homeland. He established the Islamic Centre in Geneva to continue his activism and to propagate Islam in Europe in what he hoped would be temporary exile. Europe and the United States continue to be home to thriving Islamic communities and to members of movements who have been forced into exile—so much so that claims are being made that the center of gravity of such groups as the Muslim Brotherhood has shifted to Europe.<sup>28</sup> However, it is a great leap from acknowledging the fact that the West offers a more hospitable space for conducting traditional Islamic activism to arguing that it also offers the space for a novel kind of activism that is now transforming Islam itself.

In fact, a large segment of exiled or immigrant Muslim activists continues to represent an extension of the thinking and concerns of their home movements. The centers that they set up in the West—such as the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, United Kingdom, or the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in the United States—often maintain a traditionalist stance, as do other centers such as the Islamic Cultural Centre (London’s Central Mosque) and similar institutions set up by the Sunni or Shi’a establishments. Lobbying groups and other organizations that have been set up in the United States and Europe also form an extension of home movements or trends. Where exceptions exist (such as the innovative and more liberal thinking of the Tunisian Ennahda movement, led by Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi, who is currently in exile in London), this has also been a continuation of the movement’s line before the period of exile. In many respects, the second Mecca looks very much like the first one, for now at least.

## **The Neotraditionalist Legacy of Western Islam**

However, this is not the whole story. For there is also a history of original contributions from European and Western Muslims to Islamic thought, as well as early claims from Western-based Muslim thinkers to

positions of intellectual leadership. Prominent among these thinkers was the British scholar Marmaduke William Pickthall (1875–1936), who converted to Islam in 1914 and became a leading figure on the postwar Indian cultural and political scene, writing a famous translation of the Qur’an in the process. No less significant is Muhammad Asad (1900–1992), the man who succeeded Pickthall as editor of the Hyderabad journal *Islamic Culture* and tried to emulate his enterprise of Qur’anic translation. An Austrian-born journalist who converted to Islam from Judaism in the 1920s, Asad lived in Saudi Arabia and the Indian subcontinent before moving to Spain in 1955. He acted as a close adviser to the Saudi king and later to the Pakistani government, which he served in many capacities, including as United Nations ambassador.

Intellectually, Asad is the precursor of the dominant neotraditionalists<sup>29</sup> among Western converts to Islam: they harbor a romantic admiration for the traditional virtues of premodern Muslim societies and are sorry to see it modernize. Asad’s first book, *Islam at the Crossroads* (1934), offers an uncompromising criticism of Western modernity and its materialism and warns Muslims against following in its footsteps. It was heavily quoted by modern Islamist thinkers, something that later became a matter of regret for its author. In an introduction to a new edition in 1982 and in a later essay (“This Law of Ours,” 1987), he expresses disappointment at the excessive literalism and fixation with medieval practices of the modern revivalist movements at the expense of the true spirit of Islam.<sup>30</sup> His writings, including his magisterial translation and study of the Qur’an (*The Message of the Quran*, 1980), provoked admiration as well as controversy. Traditionalists strongly criticized the Abduh-inspired rationalist approach that he adopted in rendering the Qur’an into English, and leading Islamic institutions refused to endorse it. However, many other sections of the Muslim community continue to admire and use his translation.

Asad’s neotraditionalism is being perpetuated by figures such as Abdul-Hakim Murad (b. 1960), a Sufi-inspired British-born Muslim who writes frequently in support of traditionalist moderation, and Asad’s own disciple, Murad Wilfred Hoffman, who stirred a controversy by expressing support in one of his books for wife beating at a time when he was Germany’s ambassador in Morocco in the early 1990s. Prominent in this category are also the two leading figures at the California-based Zaytuna Institute—Imam Hamza Yusuf (b. 1960) and Imam Zaid Shakir (b. 1965).

The inclination toward traditionalism among a significant sector of

native European and American Muslims is due mainly to the fact that Western converts have predominantly been attracted to Islam by the lure of its spiritualism and its premodern (even antimodern) ethos and tended to romanticize these characteristics. This trend is increasing both in numbers and influence, especially in the post-9/11 era, when it began to present itself as a more credible alternative to the now discredited or feared revivalist Islam.

Neotraditionalism is also being promoted by Sufi-inspired authors such as George Washington University's Seyyed Hussein Nasr (b. 1933). Nasr, a respected Iranian-born scholar and prolific author,<sup>31</sup> was also forced into exile by the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979. His Sufi-inspired traditionalist and largely apolitical vision of a spiritually enriched moderate Islam has found receptive ears in the West and more recently outside it.

The traditionalists' hostility to any accommodation with modernity was given a stark expression by Maryum Jameelah (b. 1934), a New Yorker who embraced Islam in the 1950s and moved to Pakistan, where she still lives. Jameelah ascribes her attitude to her own upbringing in a Reformed Jewish family, an experience that proved to her that attempts to accommodate modernity are lethal for any religious tradition:

Even before I formally embraced Islam, I found the integrity of the faith in the contemporary world greatly threatened by the so-called modernist movement, which aimed at adulterating its teachings with man-made philosophies and reforms. I was convinced that had these modernizers had their way, nothing of the original would be left! . . . Throughout my childhood, the intellectual dishonesty, hypocrisy and superficiality of "reformed" Judaism was a vivid experience. Even at that early age I knew that such a watered down, half-hearted compromise could never hope to retain the loyalty of its members, much less their children. . . . How shocked I was when I found certain scholars and some political leaders within the Muslim community guilty of the identical sins for which the God in our Holy Quran has vehemently denounced the Jews!<sup>32</sup>

A similar mistrust of modernity and modernists is expressed by Nasr, who argues that the Islamic and modernist visions are so diametrically opposed that "no amount of wishy-washy apologetics can harmonize the two."<sup>33</sup> But while Jameelah's ultratraditionalism caused her to gravitate toward the revivalists, (Jamaat Islami's leader Abu'l-Ala

Maududi declared her a soulmate even before they met), the prevalent attitude among neotraditionalists is mistrust of Islamic revivalists and modernists “who are more eager to establish institutes for Islamic social sciences than to build seminaries.”<sup>34</sup> These ethically challenged proponents of identity politics, the neotraditionalists argue, are not the answer for Islam’s crisis. They tend to instrumentalize religion and “to define themselves sociologically, rather than theologically.” Their version of instrumentalized Islam is spiritually, artistically, and humanly impoverished and narrowly partisan:

God is not denied by the sloganeers of identity; rather He is enlisted as a party member. No such revivalist can entertain the suggestion that the new liberation being recommended is a group liberation in the world that marginalises the more fundamental project of an individual liberation from the world; but his vocabulary nonetheless steadily betrays him. In the Qur’an, the word *iman* (usually translated as “faith”) appears twenty times as frequently as the word *islam*. In the sermons of the identity merchants, the ratio usually seems to be reversed.<sup>35</sup>

The neotraditionalists are equally critical of Muslim liberals, whose “thoroughgoing theological liberalism remains a friendless elite option.”<sup>36</sup> The answer can be found not in the laxness of the liberals or the “anger, anxiety, fear, and rage” of the impatient zealots but in the serenity, patience, and saintly selflessness of true believers.<sup>37</sup>

## **The Reformism of Radical Modernists**

While the neotraditionalists tend to emphasize the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Islam, the predominant type among Western-based Muslim intellectuals is a reformer who believes that Islam needs more input from modernity, not less. Typically an exiled university don, he or she emphasizes an intellectual reformulation and reinterpretation of the Islamic tradition to accommodate the demands of modernity.

Modern Islamic revivalism (and even the modern manifestations of traditionalism) are nothing but a constant effort to come to terms with the social, political, and intellectual challenges posed by modernity. The traditionalists try to make minimal concessions to modernity—just enough to preserve the maximum that could be preserved from tradition. But even here, tradition is being constantly redefined and reformu-

lated. The revivalists are more aggressive when it comes to redefining the tradition, motivated as they are by the worry that the tradition cannot be preserved as it stands. However, revivalists further distinguish themselves from the traditionalists by redefining the tradition into purist terms, while the former tend to accept the tradition more or less as it is handed down. Those in the third category, the modernists, seek to redefine the tradition along lines that are similar to the revivalists but tend toward liberal and accommodating interpretations of that tradition. There is plenty of overlap and interpenetration between these trends. Today's modernist could be tomorrow's traditionalist, while one could find traditionalists among revivalists or modernists, and vice versa.

The trend called *radical modernism* has emerged as a reaction to what some analysts (and other critics, including revivalists and modernists) describe as the failure of Islamic modernism.<sup>38</sup> Radical modernism represents an attempt to advance the modernist project further by interrogating the tradition in more radical ways. Unlike the traditionalists (who favor the preservation of inherited tradition as it has been handed down through the centuries) or the revivalists (who want to displace the inherited tradition with what they see as the more authentic and uncorrupted teachings of Islam), the radical modernists question both the living tradition and the proposed "authentic" alternatives. The early generation of modernists did not go this far. They sought merely to exploit the differences and conflicts within orthodoxy to eliminate or discredit those aspects of the tradition that have become difficult to defend in the modern era. They selectively pick and choose from various accepted authorities to support their modernizing (usually liberal) agenda. The radical modernists go further, arguing that the authentic sources have actually been misunderstood by successive generations of Muslims and need to be understood in radically new ways.

Among the influential figures in this category was the Algerian-born Malik Bennabi (1905–1973), who lived in France between 1930 and 1954 before moving to Cairo and then to independent Algeria in 1962, where he worked for a time as the national director of higher education. Bennabi is regarded as the inspiration behind the dominant faction in the Front Islamique de Salut (FIS), which won the aborted elections of 1991. But he was concerned less with specific religious thought and more with the "conditions of renaissance" (a title of one of his books) and wrote extensively about the need for a revival of an authentic Muslim civilization through intellectual and spiritual regeneration. In this, his work has parallels with that of another French-educated Muslim in-

tellektual, the Iranian Ali Shariati (1933–1977), who studied in France in the 1960s and was also credited with having a critical role in inspiring the Islamic revolution in Iran. Both concentrated on analyzing the crisis of the Muslim civilization in almost Weberian terms and avoided direct discussions of Islamic doctrine, except when examining its potential for civilizational regeneration.

Shariati's brief exile to London lasted three weeks, ending tragically with his assassination 1977. But his legacy is being perpetuated by exiled or marginalized Iranian intellectuals. Foremost among these is the philosopher-activist Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), who challenges the living tradition by distinguishing between religion (which is absolute and transcendental) and religious knowledge (which is relative and context-dependent). He uses this distinction to critique traditional interpretations of religious doctrines in favor of a more liberal and pluralistic stance.<sup>39</sup> Soroush has influenced students and young activists in Iran and beyond but has been forced by regime harassment to spend much time working and teaching in the United States and Europe.

The epitome of the Islamic intellectual in exile has to be the late Pakistani-American Oxford-educated Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988), who made important contributions to Islamic scholarship and modern Islamic thought, mainly from his post as professor at the University of Chicago. Fazlur Rahman was not in the United States by choice but was forced to abandon his position as director of the Central Institute of Islamic Research and as adviser on Islamic affairs to the president of Pakistan (1962–1968) because of his views on reform. Rahman provoked traditionalists by propounding a skeptical view of the status of the Prophet's hadith (sayings) and a more humanist view of revelation. The downgrading of the authority of hadith in favor of the Qur'an has been a persistent theme among modern reformists seeking to undermine the dogmatic hold of tradition. But the strategy is usually met with fierce and effective opposition from traditionalists. Fazlur Rahman went even further by arguing that the Qur'an itself was not purely divine but incorporated a significant human input from the Prophet.<sup>40</sup> This approach is similar to the one advocated by Nasr Abu Zayd (of whom more below), and the result in both cases was similar—an intensely hostile reaction from the religious establishment.

The fact that Fazlur Rahman found it difficult to remain in Pakistan and build a following there is typical of many leading Muslim intellectuals whose main problem was harassment by despotic regimes and hostility from the masses, who are swayed by traditional religious

scholars. Losing the struggle for religious authority to the *ulama* and other traditionalists usually sends them into exile, thus undermining their claim to represent an alternative voice of religious authority. Equally typically, Fazlur Rahman threw his lot in with an enlightened despot (in this case, the military ruler Ayoub Khan) in the hope of pushing reform from above. This strategy was adopted as long ago as the era of the rationalist *Mu'tazila*, who teamed up with the Abbasid Caliph al-Mamoun (198/813–218/833) to push a rationalist agenda through state power and ended up as one of the few major Islamic sects that has become completely extinct.

Choosing exile under these circumstances appears to be an admission of defeat and a sign of despair. Exile in the West further undermines the effectiveness of reformers, especially when the pressures and demands of integration into Western academia further weaken the claims of these intellectuals to religious authority.<sup>41</sup> One has to travel (as Fazlur Rahman did) a long way (literally and figuratively) from *Dar al-'Ulum* in Deoband to the University of Chicago to achieve prominence in one of the major shrines of Western secular academia. And this two-dimensional distance greatly reduces the effect of the message that is being beamed back to the rest of the Muslim world.

Fazlur Rahman and other leading Muslim intellectuals in the West—including two of his close associates, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1921–1986) and Seyyed Hussein Nasr—did affect (posthumously in the case of both Rahman and Faruqi) the wider Muslim intellectual scene. This happened mainly through their students and publications. Nasr's ideas have found a fertile ground in countries like Indonesia, where his works have been translated and adopted by influential figures.<sup>42</sup> Two of Fazlur Rahman's students became leading lights in the Indonesian Islamic scene, and he is cited as a key influence on the rising trend of Indonesian Islamic liberalism.<sup>43</sup> However, what had been decisive in this instance was the adoption of their work by embattled and predominantly home-grown movements that started looking around in search of intellectual support for their stance.

In what could be a sign of the times, one of Fazlur Rahman's leading associates, al-Faruqi (who tried to make a virtue out of the plight of exile), appears to have shifted back decisively toward a more traditional modernist or revivalist stance. Palestinian-born Ismail al-Faruqi worked with Fazlur Rahman as a visiting professor of Islamic studies and scholar in residence at McGill University in the late 1950s before accompanying him to Pakistan. Differences between the two close col-

leagues led Faruqi to return early to a professorship at Temple University, where he was later joined by Nasr.

In 1981, Faruqi founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), an enterprise that embodied his ideal of promoting an Islamic renaissance that is based on the appropriation of modern knowledge via an Islamic framework. The “Islamization of knowledge” project was seen as simultaneously a quest for an intellectual and civilizational revival and a reclamation of Islamic authenticity.<sup>44</sup> Relying on generous funding from private Saudi sources, the project mobilized the talents and efforts of hundreds of Western-based Muslim scholars and continues to organize a network of scholars and institutions from its Virginia headquarters and its twelve regional offices around the world.

Faruqi and his wife were murdered in mysterious circumstances in 1986 while he was still working at Temple. However, in the 1980s some of IIIT’s key figures were given the task of setting up the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur to advance the project further. Faruqi’s legacy is currently being carried on by people like Iraqi-born Taha Al-Alwani (b. 1935), the Saudi-born Abdul-Hamid Abu Sulayman, and members of the Association of American Muslim Social Scientists (and similar associations in Europe and around the world).

The tradition that was inaugurated by Fazlur Rahman lives on in the work of a new generation of intellectuals who similarly hit a wall in their attempts to promote reform at home and moved to Europe or the United States. In what looked like a supreme irony, Ebrahim Moosa, the editor of his posthumous work (*Revival and Reform in Islam*),<sup>45</sup> himself lived through an identical experience, which forced him to flee his home in South Africa to seek temporary refuge in Chicago.

Similar work is being carried out by the Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC), founded by the Egyptian-born brothers Hassan and Maher Hathout. One key figure affiliated with the Center is Fathi Osman (b. 1928), an Egyptian-born scholar and writer who edited a magazine in London in the 1980s before moving to California.<sup>46</sup> Also in this category are Swiss-born Tariq Ramadan, whose recent call for a moratorium on Islamic punishments stirred fierce controversy, and the late Zaki Badawi (1922–2006), the Egyptian-born British Muslim leader whose advice to British Muslim women to abandon the *hijab* to avoid harassment in the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings in London provoked a heated debate in the summer of 2005. Other groups such as the City Circle (a group of young Muslim professionals) in London have also emerged to help a new Muslim generation to evolve new ways of

thinking that are better adapted to life in the West. Similar groups—such as the Radical Middle Way (centered around the London-based youth-oriented Muslim magazine *Q-News*) and the Islamic Society of Britain (centered around the Muslim lifestyle magazine *Emel*)—also attempt to achieve the same objectives using slightly different approaches.

What unites the intellectual figures and schools within this trend of radical modernism is an approach that seeks to work within the confines of orthodoxy while working hard to redefine it. It attempts to develop a radical rereading and reinterpretation of traditional Islamic sources by adapting traditionally approved approaches and methods of interpretation, even though they often come with readings that those in the religious establishment find difficult to accept.

This accentuates the predicament of these radical modernists, who are forced to wage battle on two fronts simultaneously—in defense of Islam against external attacks and in defense of their own modernized understanding of Islam against the guardians of tradition. To avoid being thoroughly isolated, they often have to choose which primary battle to wage—a war for Islam against its Western detractors (the apparent choice of Tariq Ramadan and the Southern California group) in which one is careful not to antagonize the guardians of tradition or a war for modernism against its traditional opponents (the apparent choice of Fazlur Rahman), where you keep the secular and Western allies on board. Usually, these intellectuals get the worst of both worlds and are rejected by both the traditionalists and their secular opponents, which is also the fate of many among the even more radical reformists (to whom I turn in a moment).

What distinguishes radical modernists is their preference for waging their primary battle against the traditionalists, since their central argument is that without a radical rethinking of tradition, Islam will not be able to survive modernity, and Muslim societies will continue to lag behind other societies. Some of them are more cautious in their approach than others, but all are more careful than the next category of ultraradical modernists when it comes to antagonizing the traditionalists.

It is thus ironic that some of these thinkers (such as Bennabi and Shariati) appear to have inspired movements that were much more dogmatic than they would have liked, even though they have also helped inspire more open-minded movements (discussed above). Of no less significance is the way in which evolution within Islamic thought in the West has also witnessed other important shifts. The odyssey of the

Ijmali group of intellectuals (based in the United Kingdom but also operating in the United States, Europe, and Malaysia) illustrates this trajectory. Vividly chronicled by one of its leading lights, Zia Sardar, in his recent autobiographical work *Desperately Seeking Paradise* (2005), this group emerged within the broader exiled Islamic movement but soon began to outgrow it. Working within organizations such as the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) in the United Kingdom and similar organizations, members were influenced by groups such as the traditionalist Tablighi Jamaat before gravitating toward Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat Islami. They began to work in Saudi-funded institutions in the oil-boom era before shifting their allegiance to Islamic Iran, which began to fund their publications and think tanks. In the end, they became disillusioned with both Islamism and Muslim regimes and went back to the drawing board, seeking to start from where figures such as Fazlur Rahman have ended.

## Ultraradical Modernists

For a new emerging breed of Muslim intellectuals, the radical modernism of Fazlur Rahman and similar intellectuals was too timid and conventional. These ultraradical modernists have decided to launch a frontal attack on traditionalism, as was done by the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who stirred controversy with his book *The Concept of the Text* (1990), in which he advocated treating the Qur'an as a "human" text and using the tools of modern literary criticism to decipher it. Abu Zayd fled Egypt to Holland in 1995 after a court declared him an apostate and decreed a forcible divorce from his wife.

Abu Zayd sums up his position on contextualizing the Qur'an as follows:

For Muslim scholars, the Quran was always a text from the moment of its canonization until the present moment. Yet, if we pay close attention to the Quran as discourse or discourses, it is no longer sufficient to re-contextualize one or more passages in the fight against literalism and fundamentalism, or against a specific historical practice that seems inappropriate for our modern context. Similarly, it is not enough to invoke modern hermeneutics to justify the historicity and hence the relativity of every mode of understanding, while in the meantime claiming that our modern interpretation is more appropriate

and more valid. What these inadequate approaches produce is either polemic or apologetic hermeneutics. Without rethinking the Quran and without re-invoking its living status as a reformation of Islamic thought “discourse,” whether in academia or in everyday life, democratic and open hermeneutics cannot be achieved. . . . To reconnect the question of the meaning of the Quran to that of the meaning of life, it is now imperative to note that the Quran was the outcome of dialogue, debate, augment, acceptance and rejection, both with pre-Islamic norms, practices and culture, and with its own previous assessments, presuppositions and assertions.<sup>47</sup>

In a similar position is Emory University’s Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, a law professor who advocates a liberal interpretation of Islam that would make it compatible with international human rights. Sudanese-born An-Na’im bases his ideas on the Sufi-inspired insights of his mentor, the late Mahmud Muhammad Taha, who was executed for heresy in Sudan in 1985, an act that outraged people inside and outside Sudan. This sets him apart from most modernists, who rely on rational arguments rather than essentially religious (in this case, mystical) insights to back their reformist agendas. Taha’s main tool was “reverse abrogation”—the argument that earlier sections of the Qur’an from the Meccan period, which emphasize mainly general values, should supersede the later ones, which give detailed legal and personal instructions.<sup>48</sup>

Also a key figure in this category is UCLA’s Khaled Abou El Fadl (b. 1963), a prominent and prolific liberal legal scholar. Kuwaiti-born Abou El Fadl epitomizes the dilemmas of reformist Islamic thinkers in the West. Described somewhat hyperbolically by his supporters on a dedicated website as “the most important and influential Islamic thinker in the modern age,” he has been attacked by some Western critics as a “stealth Islamist”<sup>49</sup> and described by some fellow liberal Muslims as an advocate of “a dictatorship of Muslim jurists.”<sup>50</sup> He has also drawn a wave of criticisms (and even death threats) in response to his criticisms of the Muslim response to the 9/11 attacks and his frequent diatribes against Wahhabi conservatives. His theses on Islam and democracy were rejected by some Islamists as coming from “outside” the Islamic perspective and thus “hard to swallow” for Muslims.<sup>51</sup>

In his work, Abou El Fadl uses his grounding in traditional Islamic sciences and expertise in modern jurisprudence to advocate a modernity-friendly interpretation of Islamic doctrine that is opposed to the stricter one espoused by radicals or traditionalists. Like Fazlur Rahman,

his main tool is to query the faithfulness of traditional interpretations to the true spirit of Islam, mainly through questioning the authenticity of the bulk of the body of hadith and through attacks on what he sees as rigid Wahhabi scripturalism.<sup>52</sup> His diligent quest for an elusive magical formula of faithfulness to tradition and full embracing of modernity ends, however, by angering both traditionalists and modernists alike. He often undermines his own logic, as when he tries to privilege context over text in his analyses (for example, when he argues that the exultation of the virtue of sacrifice among early Muslims was a contingent measure that was dictated by the state of siege under which Muslims lived at the time).<sup>53</sup> However, his opponents could (and do) argue, using the same logic of contingency, that these values are doubly relevant today, precisely because the *umma* is under siege as never before. So even if traditional Islamic values did not support militancy, a militant response becomes imperative because of the unprecedented wave of foreign aggression.

Abou El Fadl is a founding member of a group called Progressive Muslims, an informal grouping that began to form after 9/11 in the United States. Its members founded the Progressive Muslim Union of North America (PMUNA) in late 2004 and began to run a number of websites, including Muslimwakeup.com and pmuna.org. The principles that it advocates are a belief in the equality of the worth of human life and of all human beings regardless of gender or religion and the espousal of social justice, gender equality, and pluralism. The group takes an anti-imperialist stance and moderate leftist positions on international issues,<sup>54</sup> espouses secularism, and takes a liberal and tolerant social stance (most controversially with regards to homosexuality). But it distinguishes itself from other secular groups in actively seeking to base its stance on credibly authentic interpretations of the basic Islamic sources.

Among the key figures in PMUNA is Omid Safi of Colgate University in New York State and American-born Amina Wadud, professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, who in March 2005 became the first woman to lead a mixed-sex congregation in Friday prayers. Wadud is author of *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from Woman's Perspective* (1999), an attempt to legitimize feminist positions from an Islamic perspective.

Wadud's "gender *jihad*" is joined by a number of equally combative American Muslim women activists, including Aziza al-Hibri, Asra Nomani, and Asma Barlas. One can add here as well the Canadian Irshad Manji, an openly lesbian young writer who advocates radical re-

form that jettisons traditional authoritarianism in favor of a more enlightened and tolerant faith. The robust contributions of these gender-jihadists to the debate (including the active campaign to end male monopoly of control over places of worship) gives American Islamic reform activism its distinctive character.<sup>55</sup>

Among the founders of PMUNA also is Indian-born Muqtedar Khan (from the University of Maryland), whose website ([ijtihad.org](http://ijtihad.org)) and prolific works propagate a moderate, pro-Western, democracy-friendly interpretation of Islam. His views frequently draw harsh criticisms from more radical or traditionalist Muslim activists, who accuse him of being too proestablishment. Khan's inclusion among those invited to join the founders of PMUNA at its inception in November 2004 was cited by dissident progressive Muslims as evidence that the group was not progressive enough, opting to include proestablishment figures or even some with "impeccable imperialist credentials" among its founders. As a consequence, this dissident group declined to join the forum and published a letter outlining the grounds for its objections.<sup>56</sup>

In July 2005, however, Khan resigned from the advisory board of PMUNA, alleging that the group did not observe the principles of tolerance, pluralism, and democracy that it advocated and treated those who disagreed with the dominant views within the group with disdain and disrespect. In his letter of resignation, Khan also alleged that the group was disrespectful of Islamic teachings and sources and had been gratuitously abusive toward mainstream American Muslim groups and community leaders.

Khan's remarks echo criticisms made against PMUNA by other Muslim groups inside and outside the United States. Before his resignation, Khan also criticized PMUNA's style and some of its initiatives (including Wadud's Friday prayers move), which he alleged were divisive and tended to alienate the very audience that the progressives sought to influence. The group, he complained, undermines the cause of progressive Muslims by showing indifference to and even ignorance of core Islamic teachings and would do well to be more tolerant and less abusive toward its opponents.<sup>57</sup>

The squabbling within the progressive Muslims' camp is indicative of the fragility of this project and its tentative character. It also greatly undermines its moral authority and its wider impact. However, the main limitation of the group, as one key member put it, is its inability to extricate itself from the hegemonistic agenda of the dominant Western discourse. The demands of "living inside an imperial power" and "being

part of the imperialism” poses to the group “the critical questions” of “who is defining the issues, and where are the answers coming from?”<sup>58</sup>

The rise of the ultraradical trend is a response to a perceived crisis within radical modernism in the same way that the latter trend emerged in response to crises within revivalism and early modernism. The squabbles within the movement also reflect dilemmas that are similar to those experienced by the radical modernists who found it difficult to break completely with the paradigm and methodology of revivalism. The criticism of being “disrespectful” of Islamic teachings leveled against the progressives from within their ranks points to an attachment to some of the tenets of the radical modernists who were careful to protest their respect for tradition and faithfulness to it. This is also further evidence of continuing overlap between these competing trends, which seek to displace one another but are also keen on preserving some key characteristics of their rivals.

## **The Limitations of Reform from Exile**

From this brief outline, one can see that the contributions of Western Muslims to the cause of Islamic revival and renewal and the use of the West as a refuge by reformers fleeing persecution are not new phenomena. However, what are new and significant are the increased boldness and progressive radicalization of successive generations of Western-based Muslim intellectuals. Traditionalists (and neotraditionalists) are no longer vying only with the radical modernists, who sought to evolve a creative synthesis of tradition and modern ideas and faced criticism from both sides. They have also to fight with the increasingly bold progressives and other ultraradical modernists who are less concerned with preserving tradition than with transcending it. The more irreverent and iconoclastic progressives are not afraid of openly defying mainstream orthodoxy or deliberately courting controversy. They are ready to go well beyond the current limits of orthodoxy by arguing for positions that unapologetically advocate a break with tradition in such areas as gay relationships, complete gender equality, and opposition to many Islamic legal sanctions.

One has to take care not to confuse the ultraradical “reformists” with secular academics who make important criticisms of religious thought but do not put forth alternative religious views of their own. Among this group, we can count Algerian-born Muhammad Arkoun of the Sor-

bonne in Paris, Syrian-born Bassam Tibi of the University of Goettingen in Germany, and his fellow countryman Aziz Al-Azmeh, who currently teaches in Budapest. Although these authors (particularly Arkoun) hope to see their views heeded by the religiously inclined, their contributions are not directed at the believing masses or intelligentsia. Like their Western academic counterparts, their aim is to improve understanding of religious thought rather than to contribute to it. One can liken this group to athletic coaches, who offer advice to potential athletes but do not do any sprinting themselves.

Also novel is an increased receptiveness to the ideas of Western-based thinkers in the wider Muslim world. Their influence has grown in recent years and become the focus of attention in the media and within Western and Muslim intellectual circles, largely due to the publicity that these contributions generated after September 11, 2001. In a “post-Islamist” era (to use a term coined by Leiden University’s Asef Bayat) that is characterized by disillusionment about Islamic revivalism and its promises,<sup>59</sup> their role has come into prominence. As the clamoring for reform reaches fever pitch in official (and semiofficial) policy circles both in the West and in major Muslim countries, the demand for the input of these intellectuals exponentially increases. Both Western and Muslim governments have made the promotion of a more moderate Islam a priority to counter various forms of radicalism. Major research institutions in the West also encourage work in this area. An endless stream of works on themes such as “liberal Islam,” “Islamic liberalism,” and “Islamic reformation” is now being produced by printing presses the world over. There is also a genuine grassroots demand for alternative visions of Islam to replace the discredited extremist or revivalist schemas that are now being shunned by an increasing number of disillusioned individuals and sectors. In responding to this multifaceted demand for change, some intellectual figures and movements tend to deploy aggressive tactics—establishing new institutions and cultivating new alliances with influential movements and political leaders. Others are content with the usual methods of writing, lecturing, and cultivating students and followers.

According to some analysts, both the role and the challenge facing Muslim intellectuals in the West are connected with a “deterritorialization of culture” that delinks cultures from their geographic moorings.<sup>60</sup> However, at issue here are not merely the delinkage of territory and culture but the delinkage of culture and power. Muslim communities in the West lack the power that dominant communities have to protect cultural

norms or enforce them. Again, this is not a novel feature in religious traditions. It was the fate of Christianity in its first four centuries and of Judaism for over two millennia. But rarely do those sections of the community living in exile influence powerful, centralized cultural authorities. Tensions between political power and religious authority are behind the major transformations and schisms that affected Christianity throughout its history, including the Reformation and subsequent secularization, both of which represented the tendency of political power to assert its autonomy from extraterritorial forces.

One of the major hurdles facing the contributions of Western Muslims therefore stems from their attempt to bring about a radical transformation in an established and powerful religious tradition from a position that lacks both direct power and charismatic religious authority. However, even when they succeed, such attempts at religious transformation are potentially divisive. Many analysts (including Muslim activists and potential reformers) never cease to speak, with a quasi-messianic anticipation, of an awaited Islamic reformation. However, these authors tend to forget two important points—first, that a reformation cannot be made to order (particularly not to specifications conceived from outside the religious tradition in question) and, second, that any radical rethinking of religion (even when it claims, as the Reformation did and modern Islamic revivalism does, to hearken back to the authentic roots of the religious tradition) is usually a prelude to a prolonged religious conflict.<sup>61</sup>

More important, the reform input must credibly aim to strengthen and revitalize religion, not to dilute it and tailor it to secular demands conceived in a rival religious tradition. The Luthers and Calvins of this world were no faint-hearted liberals seeking to modernize Christianity. Had that been their rallying call, the Catholic establishment could have easily dismissed their claims. Even so, their input was divisive. The efforts of the secular-inspired Muslim reformers are much easier to discredit and potentially even more divisive.

Even when advocated by *halal* Islamic scholars and activists, the claims of Euro-Islam continue to stir angry reactions from radicals, traditionalists, and neotraditionalists. The ultraradical Hizb ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party) led the offensive, charging proponents of Euro-Islam with having succumbed to pressure from Western governments that have “embarked on a new project, [in] which via coercion, and intimidation they plan to integrate the Muslims and force them to reform Islam” to

contain the “Islamic threat.”<sup>62</sup> Ramadan’s call for a moratorium on Islamic punishments and his casual remarks about the freedom of his children to marry non-Muslims provoked angry outbursts from traditionalist Muslims.

Overall, these potential reformers face a problem of credibility and authority. Part of the problem is inherent in the structure of their endeavor. Western Muslim intellectuals face a dual challenge. To make their mark, they first have to ascend the academic ladder in Western establishments, which means that they have to establish their credentials in a secular agnostic environment. However, to establish their credentials as reformers, they also have to prove their Islamic authenticity and devotion to their religious tradition. To the extent that their work appeals to the Western academic establishment, on which their reputation and livelihood depend, it tends to fall short of satisfying the requirements of Islamic authoritativeness.

Moreover, many of these thinkers are fugitives who failed to build a sufficiently strong following at home to enable them to find protection in numbers. Merely changing one’s place of residence is not going to make a person’s arguments more convincing or give their opinions more weight. At issue is producing authoritative reinterpretations of the tradition that would be found convincing by a wide section of the Muslim public. And this requires an engagement in serious and intensive dialogue with the community. It also requires the possession of considerable spiritual and moral authority that is acknowledged by the community.

The spiritual impoverishment of various strands of modernist reformism is contrasted with the intensely spiritualist approach of the neotraditionalists, who appear to have a monopoly on that aspect of religiosity. However, the spirituality of the traditionalists is combined, as we have seen, with an intense (and absurdly impractical) hostility to all things modern. By contrast, the crass political pragmatism (not to say the Machiavellianism) of the revivalists and most modernists (as evidenced by how easy they struck deals with dictators and other unsavory allies) and the pedantic intellectualism of the bulk of the radical and ultraradical modernists are not exactly the stuff of religious charisma.

As things stand now, these intellectuals are facing difficulties in interacting with the wider Muslim community even in the relative freedom and permissiveness of the West. Abou El Fadl, for example, reveals that he is no longer welcome at his local mosque in southern California

and despairs about ever achieving recognition for his work in his lifetime. Observers regard him as an “isolated figure” even among American Muslims due to his sharp criticisms of mainstream groups.<sup>63</sup>

Abou El Fadl, like other figures in Western Muslim reformism, ascribes their lack of efficacy to problems of outreach and dissemination. His books are banned in most Muslim countries, and he does not receive invitations to lecture in Muslim capitals. This, Abou El-Fadl and his colleagues argue, is due to the inordinate influence of conservative groups and governments, particularly the Saudi Wahhabi establishment, which does not like what they preach.

However, this problem of outreach is only one side of the problem. If someone like Abou El-Fadl is not found convincing, even at his local mosque, expanding his readership may not increase receptiveness to his ideas. In fact, one of the problems of many reformists may be that the discredited regimes and the mistrusted West have lately been overenthusiastic in promoting them and their ideas.

There is, in addition, the institutional problem. Most of the prominent figures in the Western reformist movements and trends function as isolated individuals who are embedded in mainstream institutions or as members of informal groupings. But despite attempts to build representative institutions for Muslims in the West, no credible *religious* institutions or seminaries have rivaled the major seminaries operating within the Muslim world—even though those institutions did not enjoy impressive credibility to start with. The institutional weakness in this area is another reflection of the general spiritual underdevelopment of the reformist movement as a whole. However, this may change with the attention that otherwise university-bound intellectuals are beginning to pay to religious institutions and other aspects of religious practice.

Despite claims (cited above) to the contrary, Muslim communities do not yet enjoy the financial and institutional independence from the wider Muslim world that they crave (or boast about). The active groups speaking for Muslims in Europe and the United States embrace a wide spectrum of views, but they continue to represent a direct extension of movements and trends at home and are indirectly inspired by home trends. The structure of funding for Islamic institutions and organizations, which often comes directly from governments (particularly the Gulf monarchies and Iran) or from private sources with a religious agenda, determines the orientation of these groups. The views expressed within the mainstream include the largely orthodox, even conservative inclinations of institutions or groups that are affiliated with

Islamist groups or religious establishments in various countries as well as the relatively liberal trends mentioned above. Given this inclination and espousing some form of orthodox revivalism, these groups are unlikely to have an earth-shattering effect on Muslim communities back home.

## **Conclusion**

Are Western Muslims an endangered species, or are they the future of Islam? They are certainly a long way from being either, even if they seem to be attempting to turn their precarious status into a virtue. The accelerated adaptation that Western Muslims are pushed to make to survive has galvanized them into serious rethinking and reflection, which, in turn, have moved the worldwide debate on Islamic reform to a new higher level.

However, the nature of the pressures that Western Muslims face and the direction in which they are required to adapt are the opposite of what is demanded by religious reform. Pressures from outside demand the downplaying of any particular religious specificity or commitment and instead require more listening and adapting to voices coming from outside the particular religious tradition. But genuine religious reform must come from a different impulse—an impulse toward a deeper commitment to a particular religious experience and an urge to enhance and elevate that experience. It depends on listening more and more intensely to the voices from the inside (both from within the heart and from within the community) rather than the voices coming from without.

Discussions of the Christian Reformation tend to confuse scholarly analyses based on hindsight with the real intentions of the leaders of the Reformation. From our perspective, the Reformation is seen as having contributed to a diluted religious commitment, an accelerated secularization, and the disintegration of the religious universe, but this was not necessarily the intention of its initiators. In fact, the leaders of the Reformation were passionate, even fanatical proponents of stricter religious observance than their rivals. Reaction to their proposals would have been more drastic had they called for the liberalization or modernization of Christianity or (horror of horrors) rapprochement with Judaism or Islam.

A religious reform project that seeks to bring about the unintended consequences of the Reformation while neglecting its ethos misunder-

stands the nature of religious authority. This is a great irony for authors like Abou El Fadl, who dedicated much effort to the study of the nature and dynamics of religious authority. But in any case, such a deliberate drive for a reformation that is based on copying another experience in another religious tradition in another era is condemned from the start to the loss of innocence: it is no longer religious reform but social engineering and intellectual tinkering.

The difficulties that are faced by some of the key intellectual figures among Western Muslims sum up the predicament of these would-be reformers. Just as Abou El Fadl continues to feel isolated and persecuted, more orthodox figures like Ramadan also face similar hostility from all directions. They are branded by secular and Western intellectuals as closet militants and dismissed by traditionalists as “instruments of cultural imperialism.” The French intellectual-politician Bernard Kouchner described Ramadan as “the most dangerous man in Europe,” while Bernard-Henri Levy dubbed him “the intellectual champion of all kinds of double-talk.”<sup>64</sup> His visa to the United States was revoked without explanation in the summer of 2004, preventing him from taking a professorship at the University of Notre Dame and effectively categorizing him as a terror threat. On the other side, one typical Arab commentator described Ramadan’s call for a moratorium on Islamic punishments as an irrelevant and suspect move that was based on superficial arguments and faulty and deficient religious knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

The reformers’ lack of popularity among Muslim audiences is not a problem in itself since religious reformers always face an uphill task at the start. However, this isolation becomes a problem if it persists and begins to resemble a cul-de-sac. Even initiatives that enjoyed a fair measure of legitimacy, such as IIIT’s Islamization of Knowledge project, appear to have made little impact. Apart from its problematic vision of resubmitting science to the dictates of religious dogma, the project has yet to show—after a quarter of a century and tens of millions of dollars later—credible breakthrough in any field.

A distinct brand of Euro-Islam or American Islam may well evolve and ultimately succeed in reconciling Islam with Western democracy and secularism. But for this brand of Islam to drive rival brands out of business and not merely turn into a new fringe sect, it needs to tap into resources of religious authority that the spokespersons of this movement do not yet enjoy.

Of great significance in this regard is the problematic status of the African American Muslim community, probably the single largest bloc of native Western Muslims. African American Islam had a strong politi-

cal component, an aspect that put it in conflict with orthodoxy in its early phases. Far from vying for leadership politically and intellectually, African American Islam is still recovering from its early isolationist and racialist phase, while African American Muslims continue to complain from a double marginalization—within America and within the Muslim community.<sup>66</sup> But the community is producing some of the key protagonists in the current debate on reform and can make an important difference by lending its weight to this or that side in it.

Western-based Muslim intellectuals might derive some momentary satisfaction from the fact that their writings are increasingly being read, translated, quoted, and debated in the wider *Dar al-Islam*. But the question they have to answer is this: are they being quoted and listened to because they are Westerners or because they are Muslims? I have a suspicion that Karl Popper and the other Karl are being quoted in Iran more frequently and with more approval than Abdolkarim Soroush.<sup>67</sup> It is one thing to be regarded as a charismatic source of religious authority and another to be seen as just an alternative to Habermas.

To have an impact in the *religious* sphere, as these intellectuals aspire, they have to be more than just intellectual, which might be an impossible hurdle to clear.

## Notes

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1. Tomas Gerholm, "Two Muslim Intellectuals in the Postmodern West: Akbar Ahmed and Ziauddin Sardar," in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, ed., Akbar Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, 187–208 (London: Routledge, 1994), 191.

2. *Ibid.*, 207.

3. *Ibid.*, 206.

4. Hossam Tammam, "Islamic Renaissance in the West: An Interview with Murad Hoffman," *IslamOnline.net*, December 29, 2005, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article\\_C&cid=1162385875683&pagename=Zone-English-Euro\\_Muslim\\_s%2FEMELayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1162385875683&pagename=Zone-English-Euro_Muslim_s%2FEMELayout).

5. Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 173.

6. Osman Bakar, "The Intellectual Impact of American Muslim Scholars on the Muslim World, with Special Reference to Southeast Asia," in *Muslims in the United States*, ed. Philippa Strum and Danielle Tarantolo, 151–170 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 2003).

7. Tammam, "Islamic Renaissance in the West."

8. Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, 165.

9. The publication of Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 elicited numerous protests (some violent) in the United Kingdom and worldwide because of perceived in-

sults to the Prophet Muhammad and his family. This was the first major confrontation in which the Muslim community in Britain acted collectively in opposition to mainstream communities. The general public found it difficult to understand or sympathize with Muslim grievances in this regard and saw Muslim demands as contradicting core British values of freedom of speech and religious belief. See Tariq Modood, "British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie Affair," *Political Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1990): 143–60. Cf. Pnina Werbner, "Diaspora and Millennium: British Pakistani Global-Local Fabulations on the Gulf War," in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, ed. Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, 213–36 (New York: Routledge, 1994).

10. Werbner describes the Rushdie affair as a "watershed" in the evolution of the British Muslim community (*Ibid.*, 231).

11. Among the most celebrated intellectuals who took this detour are Fay Weldon (Great Britain), a novelist who became Salman Rushdie's most ardent supporter from 1989 and a fierce critic of Islam and Muslims. Others include British-born Christopher Hitchens (United States) and Paul Berman (United States).

12. Abdal-Hakim Murad, "European Islam: The Return of Hagar," *openDemocracy*, July 3, 2003, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/people-migrationeurope/article\\_1327.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/people-migrationeurope/article_1327.jsp).

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. Tariq Ramadan, "L'islam d'Europe sort de l'isolement," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 1998, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1998/04/RAMADAN/10246>.

17. During a personal encounter in September 2007 in Novi Pazar in Serbia, the mufti of that predominantly Muslim city expressed similar pride in his European Muslim identity (with an added emphasis of his *indigenous* European-ness) and also argued that European Islam will not be passive.

18. Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Openworld, 2003), 1–26.

19. Jocelyne Cesari, "Islam in France: The Shaping of a Religious Minority," in *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, ed. Yvonne Y. Haddad, 36–51 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

20. See, for example, Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam," in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Safi, 33–77.

21. Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994). A more succinct restatement of Gellner's thesis can be found in Ernest Gellner, "Foreword," in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, ed. Ahmed and Donnan, xi–xiv.

22. Bassam Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

23. Ramadan, "L'islam d'Europe."

24. The conference, entitled "Fiqh Today: Muslims as Minorities," was organized by a number of groups led by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (United Kingdom). It was held from February 21–22, 2004.

25. Mahmud Al-Rashid, "Tariq Ramadan: 'The Most Dangerous Man in Europe,'" *Emel Magazine*, May/June 2005.

26. Safi, *Progressive Muslims*, 15–17.

27. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Towards an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

28. Cf. Cesari, *When Islam Meets Democracy*, 141–48.

29. A term suggested by a leading advocate of this trend, Abdullah S. Schleifer of the American University in Cairo. American-born Schleifer was NBC correspondent in Cairo when he converted to Islam from Judaism in the 1970s.

30. Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1982), 7–8.
31. See Haifaa Jawad, “Seyyed Hussein Nasr and the Study of Religion in Contemporary Society,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Science* 22, no. 2 (2005): 49–68.
32. Maryum Jameelah, “Why I Embraced Islam,” an excerpt from her book *Islam and Modernism* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1977), available at <http://www.islamfortoday.com/maryumjameelah.htm>.
33. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy From its Origin to the Present* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), 266.
34. Abdal-Hakim Murad, “Muslim Loyalty and Belonging: Some Reflections on the Psychosocial Background,” in *British Muslims: Loyalty and Belonging*, ed. Mohammad Siddique Seddon, Dilwar Hussain, and Nadeem Malik (Leicester: Islamic Foundation; London: Citizens Organising Foundation, 2003). Murad’s views are also publicized on [masud.co.uk](http://masud.co.uk), a website that boasts of being “one of the web’s leading and original resources for traditional Islam since 1996.”
35. Murad, “Muslim Loyalty and Belonging.”
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1947). Cf. Michael Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).
39. Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, trans. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
40. Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 10–17.
41. Cf. Gerholm, “Two Muslim Intellectuals,” 206–07.
42. Bakar, “The Intellectual Impact of American Muslim Scholars,” 21.
43. *Ibid.*, 15–21. See also Ali Hisyam, “Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Liberalism (in Indonesia),” *Liberal Islam Network*, December 23, 2003, <http://islamlib.com/en/article/fazlur-rahman-and-islamic-liberalism-in-indonesia/>
44. Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan* (Herndon, Va.: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989).
45. See note 39.
46. See Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Rethinking Islam and Modernity: Essays in Honour of Fathi Osman* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2001).
47. Nasr Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 98–99.
48. An-Na’im, *Towards an Islamic Reformation*.
49. Daniel Pipes, “Stealth Islamist: Khaled Abou El Fadl,” *Middle East Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 1–8.
50. M. A. Muqtedar Khan, “The Priority of Politics: A Response to ‘Islam and the Challenge of Democracy,’” *Boston Review* (April 2003), <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.2/khan.html>.
51. Azzam Tamimi, “Liberalism, Democracy and Islam: Looking for the Odd Man Out,” *Daily Star*, July 24, 2004.
52. Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001).
53. Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Speaking, Killing and Loving in God’s Name,” *Hedgehog Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 71–77.
54. See Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 1–29.

55. Cesari, *When Islam Meets Democracy*, 169–74. Cf. Katherine Bullock, ed., *Muslim Women Activists in North America: Speaking for Ourselves* (Austin: University of Texas, 2005).

56. Altaf Bhimji et al., “Text of a Comment on the Formation of PMUNA,” November 12, 2004, <http://commentpmuna.blogspot.com/2004/11/text-of-comment-on-formation-of-pmuna.html> (accessed 20 August 2005).

57. Muqtedar Khan “Is Muslimwakeup.com Undermining the Progressive Muslim Movement?,” *Ijtihad*, May 2, 2005, <http://www.ijtihad.org/Muslimwakeup.htm>.

58. Altaf Bhimji, “Sellouts or Saviors: Saving ‘Progressive’ Muslims from Themselves,” *Muslim Wake Up!*, October 26, 2003, <http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2003/10/sellouts-or-sav.php>.

59. Asef Bayat “What Is Post-Islamism?” *ISIM Review* 16, no. 3 (2005): 5.

60. Gerholm, “Two Muslim Intellectuals,” 190–01.

61. See Abdelwahab El-Affendi, “The Elusive Reformation,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 2 (April 2003): 34–39.

62. Abu Musab, “Euro Islam,” *Khilafah.com*, April 23, 2003.

63. Richard N. Ostling, “U.S. Scholar Abou El Fadl Says This Generation’s Muslims Face a Momentous Choice,” *Associated Press*, November 5, 2005.

64. Al-Rashid, “Tariq Ramadan.”

65. Muhammad Abu Rumman, “Al-Tajdid al-Islami bayna al-Tahafut wa’l-Jumud,” *Al-Ghad*, April 1, 2005.

66. Amina Wadud, “American Muslim Identity: Race and Ethnicity in Progressive Islam,” in *Progressive Muslims* ed. Safi, 270–85.

67. I have obtained partial confirmation for this assertion from my friend Dr. Ali Paya, a prominent Iranian intellectual who has extensively researched the influence of major Western philosophers on the Iranian political scene (such as Popper and Habermas).