

Change Agents

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The Voices of Muslim Reformers

by Charles Strohmer

In July 2005, most Muslims leaders in England responded to the terrorist bombings in London with unequivocal condemnation. Yet the Muslim community in England and elsewhere is often pulled in conflicting directions. On one side of the street, voices can be heard calling for Muslim separation from, if not overthrow of, Western liberal democracy. On the other side, one hears Muslim scholars and academics arguing for reform. Although the notion of 'Muslim reform' may seem like an oxymoron to Americans who see Islam only through the lens of graphic violence, Muslim reformers have been quietly working away behind the scene for years, and the events of 9/11, in particular, became a catalyst for their increasingly public stance.

The growing literature of the Muslim reform movement plays an especially significant role since 9/11 shifted the earth's geopolitical axis and the metrics for understanding the Muslim world underwent a radical reorientation in Washington and European capitals. Western governments were bewildered about what efforts Islam would initiate to help prevent another 9/11 or worse from happening. The urgency of Muslim reform has become central to this concern, especially given the uptick of democracy in the Middle East. 'Ours is not a project of developing a 'Protestant' Islam distinct from a 'Catholic' Islam...

Use of the words Muslim reform and Islamic reform, however, arouse mixed feelings even among scholars. In his Introduction to Progressive Muslims, a book of essays by fifteen Muslim scholars and activists, Omid Safi notes the essayists ambivalence toward using the words reform or reformation to describe what they envision. Because 'serious economic, social, and political issues in the Muslim world ... need urgent remedying,' Safi writes, and 'these changes will take time,' so 'if one is talking about a reformation that would address all of those levels, then I would suspect that the most progressive Muslims would readily support the usage of the term.' Yet the words Islamic reformation carry baggage about 'the Protestant reformation initiated by Martin Luther, which makes the essayists uneasy, according to Safi, who is assistant professor of philosophy and religion at Colgate University. 'Ours is not a project of developing a 'Protestant' Islam distinct from a 'Catholic' Islam... Many of us insist that we are not looking to create a further split within the Muslim community so much as to heal it. Furthermore, embedded in the very language of 'Reformation' is the notion of a significant split with the past.... It might be an easier task to start with a tabula rasa, but that would not be an Islamic project. Being a progressive Muslim, at least in the view of this group, mandates a difficult, onerous, critical, and uneasy engagement with the tradition.'

It is with these apt admonitions in mind that this essay proceeds. Writing as someone who has been personally affected by the historic division within Christianity and who also recognizes the need for dialogue between Muslims and Christians, I get Safi's point.

From within what Safi would prefer to call 'the progressive Muslim project,' voices of reform in North America and Europe address constituencies and concerns relevant to their own national contexts. In America, scholar Muqtedar Khan emphasizes the need for Muslim citizens to become more liberally democratic without losing their basic faith. Working out of his small, cluttered office at the University of Delaware (political science and international relations), the seemingly indefatigable Khan stepped into the role of a public intellectual for the American Muslim community after 9/11, when many of his incisive articles were picked up by dozens of news agencies around the world. His website carries his prolific writings and is a much visited resource for the media and for Muslims seeking a philosophically oriented approach toward Muslim life. We are seeking change, not only in how the U.S. deals with Muslims overseas but also how American society evolves at home

An Indian Muslim who is also a non-resident Fellow at the Brookings Institution, Khan believes that his flexible, liberal voice offers an alternative to those of traditionalist Islamic theologians who furnish conservative fatwas. Muslims must become more involved in the American political process, locally, regionally, and nationally, Kahn argues in American Muslims, and his use of 'American' as an adjective before 'Muslims' is instructive. 'Muslims cannot be just another ethnic group [i.e., Muslim Americans] with special interests particularly in foreign policy,' he writes. 'We are seeking change, not only in how the U.S. deals with Muslims overseas

but also how American society evolves at home... We must work as hard as possible to make it morally safe and materially satisfying.?

Whereas Khan stresses increasing Muslim involvement in the American political process, imam Feisal Abdul Rauf believes that American Muslims must play a central role in the bigger picture, healing the rift between America and the larger Muslim world. This vigorous relationship was on the table at the second annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum held in Qatar in April, sponsored by the Emir of Qatar and the Brookings Institution. In his opening remarks at the conference, the Emir admonished attendees from both the United States and Islamic countries ?to arrive through dialogue at a point of transparency? where political transformation, now begun, can be completed, ?so that Muslim peoples, who are the prime persons concerned with reform, can be assured? of their hopes.

Rauf spent more than three decades in universities, mosques, synagogues, and churches explaining Islam but generally resisting discussion of political issues, which, he said, he saw as no-win situations. The events of September 11, however, pulled him from the mahogany pulpit of his mosque 12 blocks from the World Trade Center into the media spotlight, where he says he struggled to provide sound bite political answers. His book, *What's Right with Islam*, explains in-depth what he could only explain in sound bites after 9/11. American Muslims and the U.S. government may become forces of healing toward the larger Muslim world.

Drawing on his long history in interfaith dialogue, Rauf takes Abrahamic monotheism as his foundational starting point, insisting that it is both theologically and socially radical because it offers a ?common roots? understanding for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. From the Islamic imperative that ?God is one? and from the Quran's teaching about Adam and Eve, Rauf derives two essential principles to support his view: that all humans are equal ?because we are born of one man and woman,? and ?because we are equal ... we have certain inalienable liberties,? such as to accept or reject God, to think for ourselves (ijtihad), and to make individual choices without coercion. A ?cluster of monotheism's core ideas,? which Rauf shorthands as the ?Abrahamic ethic,? drives the book's thesis, showing what's right with both Islam and America and offering suggestions about how American Muslims and the U.S. government may become forces of healing toward the larger Muslim world.

If Khan is largely for academe, and Feisal, who wears his heart on his sleeve, is chiefly pastoral, then the Canadian journalist and television personality Irshad Manji cries like a Muslim Amos sent to the grassroots. ?Islam is on very thin ice with me,? she writes, then shows why in her blunt and provocative book, *The Trouble with Islam Today* (retitled from *The Trouble with Islam*). This daring book, a bestseller, is meant as a wake-up call for what Manji calls mainstream Islam, to whom the very liberated Manji puts her honest questions about fundamentalist attitudes toward women, human rights, Jews, America, and even the Quran. The real battleground for hearts and minds lies in the Muslim immigrant communities of European cities

But it's not all diatribe. Manji's appeal for a mainstream return to ijtihad (independent thinking) lies at the heart of her passion. Without ignoring or romanticizing Islam's darker periods ? which is the great weakness of an otherwise important book, *Why I Am a Muslim: An American Odyssey* by Asma Gull Hasan, a somewhat conservative Muslim woman? Manji shows the benefits that ijtihad once produced for both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. And then she asks, ?When did we stop thinking?? The book suggests ways Muslims may liberalize Islam through what she calls ?operation ijtihad,? an ambitious initiative that would empower more Muslim women economically, align Islamic human rights codes with the modern world, reform the radio and television outlets, create a less militant paradigm for the relationship between mosque and state, incorporate more democracy into the Muslim world, and engage in peaceable interfaith activity. This, she concludes, ?would give Muslims a future to live for rather than a past to die for.?

The European situation, including Britain, is more nuanced than the North American, largely because its Muslim populations have a longer and more established social and political history in nations where Muslims (of the theological left, right, and center) are represented by sophisticated networks of mosques and political NGOs that defend the rights of Muslims and shape their participation in civic life, including the introduction of Islamic law for settling civil cases. Muslim reformers in Europe therefore face different challenges.

In *The War for Muslim Minds*, Gilles Kepel, a French Arabist and scholar of Islam, has little patience for neoconservative foreign policy, but most of the book is taken up with what he sees as the chief enemy of Muslim reform in Europe: jihadist ideology imported from Saudi Arabian Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Qutb brothers (Sayyid and Muhammad), and like-minded

sources. Kepel argues that the jihadists are losing ground, but he does so by providing a political, religious, and historical tour of the Middle East (a nexus of international disorder?) that could be seen as providing evidence the jihadists aren't losing ground. This remains something of a paradox in the book. Kepel's conclusion is that the real battleground for hearts and minds lies in the Muslim immigrant communities of European cities, where they are being propagandized with terrorist ideology and tactics that seek converts to jihadist violence. The battle for Europe, he writes, is a battle for self-definition. The war for Muslim minds around the world may turn on the outcome of this struggle.

And it is a struggle rooted in the concerns of daily life. Bill Gordon, a mental health nurse manager who works for Britain's National Health Service, lives near a small, neighborhood mosque in a well integrated section of Birmingham, England. What fascinates Gordon are the daily lives of young Muslims. They go filing into the mosque for prayers wearing traditional Muslim garb, and then later I see them around town wearing baseball caps turned backwards and all kinds of hip Western gear. Pop culture is completely inside Islamic youth culture here. It's just that it's all under wraps. This neighborhood microcosm represents the conflicting forces of religion, secularism, and pluralism pulling at Europe's growing Muslim population (estimated at at least 15 million), whose heaviest concentrations are found in France, Britain, and Germany.

One voice in this contentious mix is that of Tariq Ramadan, a prominent Islamic intellectual followed by many of Europe's young Muslims. Arguing that Islam is universal and comprehensive in its message (for all of life, as Christians would say about their faith), Ramadan offers European Muslims a fresh reading of Islamic sources to help them integrate faithfully into their pluralistic settings. *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* takes the vision of his earlier *To Be a European Muslim* (1997) and applies that more theoretical work in practical terms on the ground, suggesting a number of concrete responses to questions asked by Western Muslims in the various areas of their daily lives.

Just as decades ago it dawned on many Western Christian families that, try as they might, they could no longer keep the world out, Western Muslims has that kind of feel to it. The book carries chapters of well-thought-out commentary, written with much circumspection, on daily practical issues that secular pluralism in Europe forces Muslim communities to deal with. Ramadan's advice ranges from issues of food, fashion, and free time to children's education and Islamic feminism, to social commitments, political involvement, and partnerships with groups outside of Islam who share progressive Muslim concerns, such as about the environment, human rights, and drug abuse. His stated goal in all this is to see the creation of an independent Western Islam, a new Muslim personality, whose conscience can be faithful to Islamic principles while being fully integrated into Western societies.

But controversy has swirled around Tariq Ramadan. Although he made *Time* magazine's list of the world's top intellectuals in 2004, that same year the U.S. Department of Homeland Security revoked his visa to enter the U.S., which prevented him from taking up a new post as lecturer in Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame. The problem is what some scholars and others perceive as Ramadan's double discourse, a term he himself uses to describe that accusation. This is the great task we have been called to shoulder since 9/11

In *The War for Muslim Minds*, for instance, Kepel argues that Ramadan says one thing to Western audiences and quite another thing to fundamentalist Muslims in order to expand his circle of influence. Others, however, are having a change of heart. Andre Hussey, a lecturer in French studies at the University of Wales, critically interviewed Ramadan in June, 2004 for the *New Statesman*, but in a September, 2005 interview of Ramadan for the *New Statesman*, Hussey writes that he came away impressed with his honesty, passion, and courage.

Publicly, things do seem to be looking up for Ramadan. Still rejected by the U.S., he has been taken in by Britain, where he recently accepted two posts, one as a Visiting Fellow of St. Anthony's at Oxford University and the other, not without some controversy, as an advisor to a Home Office task force on Muslim extremism in England.

In the present atmosphere of mutual mistrust and disagreement between the West and Islamic religion, the Muslim reform movement can act as a catalyst for positive change in dialogue with responsible counterparts in the Western world. Many important questions will arise, especially because the dialogue must include Muslims, Christians, Jews, and secularists. Though they all work out of different worldviews, with all the headaches resulting from that, it must be a struggle together to make the world a safer place

for communities and families who see things differently. This is the great task we have been called to shoulder since 9/11. And to achieve the goal will require an imaginative height previously unknown to us.

Books discussed in this essay

Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism. Edited by Omid Safi. Oneworld, 350pp., \$25.99.

American Muslims: Building Faith and Freedom. M.A. Muqtedar Khan. Amana, 194pp., \$14.95.

What's Right With Islam: A new Vision for Muslims and the West. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf. HarperSanFrancisco, 314pp., \$23.95.

The Trouble With Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith. Irshad Manji. St Martin's Press, 240pp., \$12.95.

The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West. Gilles Kepel. Harvard University press, 320p., \$23.95.

Western Muslims and the Future of Islam. Tariq Ramadan. Oxford University Press, 272pp., \$29.95.

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