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The Islamic Reform Tradition

Like a specter haunting the Western mind, Islamic revivalism appears in distorted forms, rarely conceptualized on its own terms. Instead, Islam is framed through a particular reading of the experience of post-Reformation Europe, an uncritical self-understanding of the emergence of European modernity. Western definitions of the "modern," which inform the larger body of scholarship on Islam, presume a necessary qualitative break with the traditional past.[1] The modern is defined in terms of European conceptual and institutional arrangements in which religion has been marginalized from civil society, state, and politics. Accordingly, the modern becomes the site of a progressive emancipatory historical unfolding, whereas tradition, its conceptual opposite, is the locus of tyrannical politics and social stagnation. And the political subject who inhabits this space of the modern is necessarily an autonomous, self-constitutive, and tradition-free individual. These categories do not adequately comprehend Islamic imaginaries or the forms of subjectivities that might possibly emerge in a modern Muslim world. Once the institutions and practices of Western liberal societies are conceptualized as the measure of the modern, it is not surprising that across the scholarship on Islamic movements today, Islam is often depicted (either explicitly or implicitly) as a major, if not the principal, contemporary force threatening democracy and individual freedom.

The oppositional construction of modern versus traditional, secular versus religious, humanist versus antihumanist, and rational versus irrational

was assumed in early orientalist scholarship. The orientalists characterized their "cultural synthesis" of Islam as traditional and nonrational and hence inimical to modernity. Framing their analysis within the universal humanism and rationality of the post-Enlightenment period, early orientalists presumed that autonomous political subjects alone are capable of exercising reason. Consequently, most orientalists found Muslim reformers, with their claim of a divine origin and their conception of a collective subject, to be romantically defective and backward looking.[2]

The orientalists' conception of Islam as a cultural monolith was critically analyzed in the 1960s by nationalist and Marxist scholars who characterized this body of literature as imperialist, essentialist, and ahistorical.[3] But it was only after the landmark publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that this discourse was seriously challenged, both conceptually and institutionally, within and beyond academia. Drawing on Foucault's concept of power/knowledge and Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual," Said explained orientalism as a discourse of power founded on the dichotomization of East and West, one that served a critical function in the articulation and the unfolding of imperial empires, in both the colonial and neocolonial periods.[4]

Under the influence of *Orientalism*, a new generation of scholars produced a far more complex and historically nuanced body of knowledge on the Middle East. This revisionist literature varied in approach and method. Whereas some sought out political economy, others embraced Marxism and or the "new" social history of the time.[5] There were also those who turned to the postmodernist critiques to contest the cultural essentialism and modernist assumptions favored by orientalist scholarship.[6] Although this highly theoretical and self-consciously critical scholarship represents a refreshing break from the essentialist, ethnocentric, and racist writings of older orientalists, the new discourse on Islam continues to reproduce key aspects of earlier arguments. Although Islam as a whole may not be depicted as backward looking or portrayed as traditional and nonrational, contemporary radical Islamists are drawn that way. A good part of this revisionist scholarship on Islam assesses contemporary Islamic movements as modern only to the extent that they employ modern material and institutional resources; however, the scholarship implies that these movements embrace modern resources only to attain

nonmodern ends—that is, to establish theocratic and authoritarian regimes. In searching for aspects or instances of Islamic tradition and practice that are commensurable with modernity, the yardstick of analysis remains the modern West.[7]

The reproduction of central aspects of the older arguments on Islam in this revisionist scholarship is rooted in the discursive framework of Said's landmark book. While striking a powerful blow to the essentialist totalizing methodologies and arguments of orientalist scholarship, *Orientalism* fell short of a more radical critique of liberal humanism and, in particular, its intrinsic connection with the expansion of Western hegemony worldwide from the eighteenth century on. Rather than viewing orientalist discourse as inherent to the Western humanist tradition, Said considers it a deviation from that tradition's grand narratives and emancipationist politics.[8] Critical of the abuses committed in the name of the Enlightenment, Said nonetheless remains faithful to the secular liberal humanist tradition. Although he draws on the work of Foucault, a trenchant critic of Western humanism, to expose "the deep complicity of orientalist forms of knowledge with institutions of power," Said never follows this critique to its logical conclusion in which the universalist claims of European humanism are fundamentally contested.[9]

This methodological tension can be clearly detected in the revisionist historiography on Islam that followed Said's path. Many of the recent works on contemporary Islam continue to invoke the humanistic, secularist, and anti-traditionalist assumptions of the post-Enlightenment period, in their effort to analyze modern Islamic thought and politics. Fidelity to the tradition of secular progressive humanism and its human liberationist project drew the revisionist scholars, as I will discuss in a later context, to analytical frameworks that tend to assess the modernity of Islam in terms of how closely it conforms to Western cultural and institutional arrangements. The continuing strength of the liberal humanist discourse within scholarship on Islam is especially striking, given the trenchant and now long-standing critiques that have been brought forward by scholars in many different disciplines.[10] It is this body of work on which I draw, particularly the works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Talal Asad, to create new ways for conceptualizing Islamic reformers and their movements.

Islam: A Discursive Tradition

Rather than accepting the counterposition of tradition and modernity, I suggest that we pursue Alasdair MacIntyre's conceptualization of tradition as an ever-changing set of socially embodied arguments extended through time. MacIntyre, a moral philosopher and an eminent critic of liberalism, posits tradition as "an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted."[11] This definition provides a useful framework for understanding how the function and the meaning of Islamic arguments change over time and in response to both internal and external challenges facing the tradition.

Elaborating on MacIntyre's concept of tradition, Talal Asad, an anthropologist of religion, suggests that a more effective way of addressing Islam is to approach it the way Muslims do—namely, as a "discursive tradition" consisting of historically evolving discourses embodied in the practices and institutions of communities. To Asad, Islamic tradition is a set of

> discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a *past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a *future* (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a *present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions).[12]

Thus, tradition is more appropriately conceptualized as discourses extended through time, as a framework of inquiry rather than a set of unchanging doctrines or culturally specific mandates. To put the same point in another way, what appears to scholars as a commitment to fixed, essentialized tenets that must be preserved at all costs is rather a framework of inquiry within which Muslims have attempted to amend and redirect Islamic discourses to meet new challenges and conflicts as they

materialized in different historical eras. From this starting point, a tradition-constituted inquiry is viewed as an embodied continuity, as having long-term temporal structures built around kinds of arguments that conventional Western scholarship has been unable to recognize. What distinguishes this definition of tradition from the standard formulations of "traditional" is that tradition refers not simply to the past or its repetition but rather to the pursuit of an ongoing coherence by making reference to a set of texts, procedures, arguments, and practices. This body of prescribed beliefs and understandings (intellectual, political, social, practical) frames the practices of Islamic reasoning. It is these collective discourses, incorporating a variety of positions, roles, and tasks that form the corpus of Islamic knowledge from which a Muslim scholar (*'alim*) argues for and refers to previous judgments of others, and from which an unlettered parent teaches a child. It is from within this tradition of reasoning that claims are made and evaluated and are either rejected or accepted as Islamic.[13]

This analytical framework allows us to move away from the counterposition of Islamic tradition and liberalism in conventional literature. For, notwithstanding its claim of breaking with tradition, liberalism itself, as MacIntyre further explains, evolved to become a tradition: "liberal theory is best understood, not at all as an attempt to find a rationality independent of tradition, but as itself the articulation of an historically developed and developing set of institutions and forms of activity. . . . Like other traditions, liberalism has its set of authoritative texts, and its disputes over their interpretation."[14] If Islamic reformers have sought support for their contemporary arguments by referring back to foundational texts of the past, they are little different from liberal theorists who go back to authoritative texts to resolve contemporary incoherencies, nor are they different from American jurists and lawmakers who seek to determine what the forefathers intended in the foundational documents of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights or who argue their different positions through competing interpretations of these foundational texts.

By failing to approach Islam on its own terms and by being unable to imagine Islam as inhabiting a modern world, scholars are often led to wrongly conclude that "fundamentalist" Islamic movements that violently reject Western modernity embody the essence of Islam, whereas Islamic thinkers who seek to redefine a modern Islam are viewed as inevitably

borrowing from liberal political thought. My intention is to highlight the problems of these notions by analyzing the work of two significant Muslim reformers whose work many consider to have inspired the two major strands of contemporary Islamic political thought. The first is the eighteenth-century Arabian reformer Muhammad ibn ʿAbdul Wahhab (1703–87), who is often referred to in the literature as the legendary mastermind of a "fundamentalist," "ultra-right," and "violent" political movement and, concomitantly, as the inspiration for present-day militant Muslim groups (like al-Qaʿida) in their struggle against modernity. The second is the nineteenth-century Egyptian reformer Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905), who has been designated a liberal humanist and described as having "underlined the essence of Muslim humanism" for the modern world.[15]

Dissenting from these views, I propose that both reformers' ideas be addressed not simply in terms of their political goals and especially not in terms of either their "fundamentalist" or "liberal" inclinations.[16] Rather, their work should be evaluated in terms of the manner in which they engage with and speak from a historically extended, socially embodied set of arguments that have their own internal standard of rational coherence. We can accordingly then grasp their "intellectual" production not simply in its proximate political function but also in its relation to a set of enduring arguments that have been central to Muslim scholarship in general and thus to the two reformers' conceptual formation.

In approaching the works of these two reformers, who come from different historical periods and social settings, my goal is to provide a way of conceptualizing the Islamic tradition that is different from that proposed by conventional scholarship.[17] I also want to illuminate some aspects of how Muslims view modernity, as these views have been overshadowed by Western scholarship and because they problematize assumptions founded on the oppositional dichotomies of modern versus traditional, secular versus sacred. In other words, I want to demonstrate that a tradition is not simply the recapitulation of previous beliefs and practices; rather, each successive generation confronts its particular problems via an engagement with a set of ongoing arguments. In constructing their arguments, Muhammad ʿAbduh and ibn ʿAbdul Wahhab had to argue from within the tradition. This does not mean they were mimicking the past. Rather, they were attempting to make persuasive arguments

for the present by referring to a past and to an authoritative corpus that determined the epistemological, cultural, and institutional limitations and possibilities within which their claims could make sense. Not every claim that relates itself to the past is therefore part of the tradition, as tradition is being adjudicated and re-adjudicated over time through consensus. As such, Islamic tradition is not fixed but is constantly changing, albeit within a long-standing framework that impinges on the direction and form of that change. Viewed from this perspective, these two reformers can no longer be counterposed as "fundamentalist" and "liberal" but should instead be understood in terms of the differences in the worlds they inhabited. And any discontinuities in their thought may be apprehended as part and parcel of a discursive break dictated by the circumstances of a changed world.

Discourse of Reform and Revival

As many scholars have already noted, contemporary Islamic revivalism is neither an innovation nor a novelty, for it is deeply embedded in the Islamic tradition, which conceptualizes human history as a continuum of renewal, revival, and reform (*tajdid*, *ihya'*, and *islah*).[18] These concepts are understood within the tradition as imperative for safeguarding and ensuring the continuity of a moral community. As a corrective form of criticism, renewal, revival, and reform involve going back to the authoritative corpus to evaluate whether current norms and beliefs fall within the institutional and conceptual boundaries authorized by the Qur'an and the Sunna (the Prophet's sayings and practices). The return to the authoritative texts, far from a reassertion of already agreed upon tenets, requires a particular form of reasoning through which existing interpretations of the texts are challenged and new understandings put forward. The moral critic who takes up the task of redefining the true faith and reasserting anew its authority is called a revivalist. Revivalists, as Abdolkarim Soroush, a contemporary Muslim scholar from Iran, explains, "are not lawgivers (*shari'un*) but exegetes (*sharihun*)" in that they correct "defects" in this body of Islamic knowledge, which "abound[s] in exegeses," and in so doing they bring new insights and understanding to this incomplete form of human knowledge.[19]

Critical to the Islamic historical memory is the notion of the Prophetic age as the exemplary and revered era for all times. Under the guidance of the prophet Muhammad, the early community of Muslims is envisioned as having attained the highest and purest form of faith possible in this world. From within this historical imaginary, moving forward in time is conceived as fundamentally dangerous because as the archetypal era recedes, Muslims are bound to become more prone to corruption (*fasad*) and degeneration. This impending retreat (*taqahqur*) from piety is detected in a laxity about and deviation from the exercise of relevant virtues and authorized practices. To circumvent this tendency toward a progressive degeneration of the community over time, Muslims devised a mechanism in the form of corrective criticism and renewal to be carried out by the pious and the learned. Over time, the practice of reform and revival became a defining feature of the Islamic tradition, an authorized practice founded on the Quranic verse, which repeatedly instructed pious Muslims to "promote the good and prevent the evil."

The genealogy of this concept of impending retreat (*al-taqahqur*) is traced back in conventional Islamic histories to the third Islamic century and in particular to the work of al-Jahiz (d. 255 A.H./868 A.D.), a prominent Muslim thinker and man of letters. Al-Jahiz's chronicle of Islamic history identifies three successive stages of retreat, as Muslims slowly backed away from the highest and most virtuous stage (the era of *tawhid*) to "the age of depravity," moving toward the third stage, what he described as a virtual repudiation of faith.[20] Although this theory of "progressive retreat" (*aswa'*) seems pessimistic, al-Jahiz drew a different conclusion. As a fellow Muʿtazila committed to the practice of corrective criticism, al-Jahiz put his trust in pious and faithful Muslim scholars, such as himself, who through ceaseless effort of "promoting the good" would lead the community toward that "right path" of impeccable faith (*tawhid*).[21] Two generations later, the role of reformers as bearers of truth and justice was firmly established. A normative act, revivalism came to be seen by the twelfth century, as the most eminent reformer of that age, al-Ghazali (d. 505 A.H./1111 A.D.), revealed, a practice authorized by none other than the Prophet himself when he said, "God will send to this Community at the head of each century those who will renew its religion for it."[22] Al-Ghazali not only reconfigured Islamic orthodoxy by extending Aristotelian methods of reasoning into the Islamic idiom and

semantics; he also infused features of mystical Sufism into the orthodox discourse, creating a "vital nerve between the inner and exterior aspects of religion."[23]

Later generations of reformers continued to elaborate and expand on the practice of revivalism, attempting to ensure the effectivity of reform as a corrective to moral and social backsliding. As it evolved, reformers came to invoke the right to *ijtihad*, reasoning independent of precedent, to reestablish the authority of the Qur'an over a consensus based in precedent (*taqlid*) and to challenge taqlid as authoritative practice in order to contest those who, abiding by consensual precedent, defended the status quo. Most reformers invoked the concept of ijtihad to challenge the authority of the religious leadership in their respective communities. Going back to the original authoritative sources, the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, revivalists claimed to want to free Islam from the dead weight of ineffectual and harmful accretions. They considered the conventional religious authority, which imbued taqlid, as unable either to recognize the serious problems raised by current practices or to provide proper guidance to the community. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as recent historians' work demonstrates, abounded with Muslim revivalists who were greatly alarmed by what they saw as a pervasive moral laxity and decadence ailing their respective communities and who, accordingly, sought their renewal and revival by invoking the practice of ijtihad.[24]

In support of ijtihad, several of the early reformers, referencing the authoritative sources, extended the argument to say that "God has conferred His Gifts on later generations as He did on the earlier ones," thus making the claim that God authorized all generations, regardless of how close or far they were from the era of Revelation, with the right to make their own judgments over what they considered to be the "good" of society.[25] Many of these reformers located their argument for ijtihad in the work of the fourteenth-century Hanbali thinker ibn Taymiya, for it provided them with sound and effective arguments against the infallibility of consensual precedent (taqlid) as espoused by established religious authority.[26] Moreover, in making their claim for the right to practice ijtihad, eighteenth-century reformers came to understand degeneracy as the failure of human knowledge and the dereliction of a feeble religious authority rather than the consequence of an innate regression over time.[27]