

## WAITING FOR LUTHER, AND THE BOMBS: THE «ISLAMIC REFORMATION» AS A WAR STRATEGY<sup>1</sup>

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In May 2005, I went to listen to a self-described «Muslim Refusenik» deliver a talk in London about the best way to promote a «Liberal Islamic Reformation.» The speaker delivered a passionate plea for a radical rethinking of the Islamic religion by reviving *ijtihad* (independent thinking and interpretation) so as to bring Islam in line with the spirit of the age, in particular liberalism and democracy. According to the speaker, Islam did have a number of «reformations» in the past, but they were all «backward looking» and conservative. They succeeded in bringing Islam closer and closer to its seventh century image, rather than helping it adapt to modernity. As a result, Islam is the only major religion in which literalism occupies the mainstream. While fundamentalist movements exist in all religions, it is only in Islam that moderates are forced into silence in the face of extremism, since extremists are better equipped to enlist orthodoxy on their side.

Even by radical reformist standards, this reformer's prescriptions were bold. The analogy with Luther did not take long to be invoked. Not one, but two Luthers were mentioned: Martin Luther and his latter day namesake, Martin Luther King Jr., the first as an inspiration for religious reform, the second for effective non-violent advocacy of change. However, while both men have been known for their enthusiasm for the holy scriptures which they profusely quoted, our would-be reformer went even further, calling on Muslims to challenge and criticise the Quran, the Muslim holy book. She (yes, it was a lady) questioned the Muslim belief in the Quran as the literal and direct word of God, arguing that Muslims should feel free to question the Quran and God himself.

I must admit that I was impressed, not with the lady's arguments, but with her intense *religious* zeal. I had come to the meeting with a great deal of scepticism. The claims of the Ugandan-born Canadian activist of a Bengali origin, who has never been to a religious seminary, and whose knowledge of Arabic language is rudimentary, to be the leader of the «next big thing» in the Muslim reformation quest was palpably implausible. Given that she was also a self-confessed lesbian, her foray into religious activism within a religion she admits is dominated by literalism is even more remarkable. The hostility she provoked by her frontal attack on both Islamic religion and Asian culture ensured that she was regarded by many of her co-religionists as the enemy within. Her polemical book, *The Trouble With Islam: A Wake-up Call for Honesty and Change* (2003), provoked a storm of angry rebuttals from Muslims in North America and round the world, and the fact she used to host a pro-gay television show *QueerTelevision*, did not endear her to her co-

<sup>1</sup> The author is a fellow in the Global Uncertainties Programme, funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and would like to express his gratitude for the support of the two councils for his research.

religionists either.

But when I asked her why she insisted on promoting an agenda of religious reform when she had a more plausible secular liberal agenda which she could have promoted without all this controversy, her answer was most revealing. First, she insisted that she was a genuine believer. She did not want to abandon her faith, and would like to justify her liberal agenda from within to satisfy her own religious conscience. Additionally, she argued, most Muslims needed to be convinced that they were not going against their faith when they espouse liberal values and universal human rights. Many Muslims have been erroneously convinced by the mullahs and extremists that moving in that direction would be a contravention of Islamic teachings. Luther was again invoked, reminding us all that the venerable priest had also been denounced as a heretic during his time.

### **Man versus text**

The argument is often made that Islam is distinguished by the absence of a formal priesthood, which makes it easier for charismatic reformers to challenge the tradition. While this is true to some extent, Islam does have its own guardians of orthodoxy in the form of learned men or religious leaders, as well recognized institutions. That these institutions (such as the leadership of sufi sects or religious schools of thought) often have an informal character does not detract much of their influence. By the same token, religions with formal leadership institutions, such as Christianity, do also admit an input of charisma and show a fair degree of flux in the way religious authority is constituted and reconstituted. This might go to indicate that Islam is really not that unique when it comes to the contested nature of religious authority.

However, Islam is distinct in being more of a text-based religion than its rivals, and also because of the relative transparency of its history. As one author (exaggeratedly) put it: «The divine text remained the fundamental truth in this community. In fact the community would not have continued to exist without the text. It is the only justification for its continuity, and it is what endows its existence with its sublime legitimacy.»<sup>2</sup>

While the founding religious texts of Judaism and Christianity are the subject of considerable debate among the believers, with a mounting consensus discounting their un-questioned authenticity, no such controversy surrounds the Qur'an. There is a consensus among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike (even though some recent comments have tried to challenge this) that the text of the Qur'an could at least be traced authentically to the Prophet Muhammad, whether one accepts his claim that it was the direct word of God or not. There is much less agreement on the *sunna*, the practices and (extra-Quranic) words of the

<sup>2</sup> Radwan As-Sayyid (1986). *Al-Umma wa al-Jama'a wa as-Sulta: Dirasat fi al-Fikr as-Siyasi al-'Arabi al-Islami*, Beyrouth: Dar Iqra', p. 10.

Prophet, which had been recorded at a later date. But even here the scope of disagreement remains limited. This does not give those seeking to challenge the main tenets and teachings of the faith much of a foothold to do so from «within» the tradition.

Additionally, Islam claims, like Christianity, to be itself a reform movement from within the Abrahamic tradition. On the other hand, a number of Muslim thinkers in early modernity have been given to argue that the Christian Reformation was an attempt to emulate Islam's rationalism<sup>3</sup>. However, Islam's claims to revising the Old Testament differ from the rival Christian vision in its emphasis on faithfulness to the law. Christianity has also affirmed its strict commitment to the commandments and teachings of the prophets, but as a religious tradition centred on the Charisma of its founder, it has emphasized the spirit of those teachings and criticised the attitude of those who only emphasized the letter. This tendency was pushed further in the Pauline interpretation of the faith, and provided would-be reformers with a firm foothold from within the tradition from which to mount their own initiatives to challenge orthodoxy. No similar room of manoeuvre exists for Muslim reformers.

Nevertheless, reformers of all sorts did abound in Islamic history. The pattern of this reformist movements have been described in terms of a tension between a message-oriented approach which relied on the scriptures at the expense of human agency and initiative, and a leader-oriented approach which emphasized the charisma of the divinely-inspired figure<sup>4</sup>. An alternative rendering was to see a constant alternation between text-oriented urban puritanism and the less erudite folk religion of the illiterate rural masses. This is Ernest Gellner's «pendulum theory,» which he derives from Ibn Khaldun. According to Gellner, the pendulum has stopped, since the ongoing Islamic revival and its literalist bent is a natural consequence of modernity which favoured the learned urban elite at the expense of the rural-based traditional religious leadership<sup>5</sup>.

There had indeed been an enduring tension in Islam between claims anchored in the actual practice of the community and the authority of sacred texts. In the first instance, authority was seen to reside in the living tradition, in the second, authority was anchored in an accepted text. Interestingly, this tension related to the status of the text itself, and whether it needed to be certified by a living source. The problem arose with regards to the Quran itself, which was initially taken from recognised *qurra'* (readers), but arguments were made for recording it when a large number of *qurra'* lost their lives in wars. This recording was

<sup>3</sup> Michaëlle Browers y Charles Kurzman (eds.) (2004). *An Islamic Reformation?* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> John Obert Voll (1979). «The Sudanese Mahdi: Frontier Fundamentalist.» *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (10), 145-166.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Gellner (1994). *Conditions of Liberty, Civil Society and its Rivals*. London: Hamish Hamilton; y Ernest Gellner (1981). *Muslim society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

not deemed sufficiently conclusive since different *qurra'* continued to use different copies and render the text orally in their native dialects. During the reign of the Caliph Uthman (r. AH 23-35/ 644-656 CE) this problem was tackled by compiling one authoritative text on the basis of the dialect of Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe.

Similar contests erupted regarding various religious practices. Here again a decisive shift occurred under Abu Abdullah ash-Shafi'i (AH 150-204/767- 820 CE), who advocated a shift from the notion of accepting living traditions as authoritative by insisting that those traditions must be justified by reference to Qur'an or authentically certified textual *sunna*. This in turn led to an effort to compile the pronouncements ascribed to the Prophet and reports about his actions.

In the end, the two approaches have become complementary in practice, since it is a requirement to this day that texts have to be learned at the hands of a living authority, who must in turn have learned them in the same way. The written tradition cannot thus be cut off from the living tradition, but must in fact be its very embodiment. However, texts could still be appealed to criticise living traditions which do not conform to perceived orthodoxy. This is precisely the source of power of movements like Wahhabism, which insist that only religious practices for which explicit and authentic textual authority can be cited may be considered legitimate.

### Reformation as a «war of ideas»

A long string of early modern and contemporary claimants to the «reformation» mantle have continued to emerge in all Muslim eras. These range from the Iranian Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) to his present day fellow countryman, Abdolkarim Soroush. In recent years, pretenders to the mantle of Luther, self-proclaimed or anointed by Western academia, tended to multiply at rate close to that of claimant to Mahdism in previous times of Muslim crisis, but the elusive reformation itself has failed to materialise<sup>6</sup>. We shall return to the specific cases of some of these would-be Luthers a little later.

A very significant complicating factor is the fact that that religious reform is at present more a demand made from the outside than from inside the Muslim community. Since 9/11, it is increasingly becoming part of the package of the «war of ideas» deemed essential to beat back and contain terrorism. To combat radical Islam, as the 9/11 Commission and many other voices recommend, the US needed to join the war within Islam on the side of the moderates.

According to some reports, the US is now busy working to engineer such a «reformation» by pumping millions of dollars into media projects, cultural

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Martin Kramer (2001). *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*. Washington DC: The Washington Institute For Near East Policy; Michaëlle Browers y Charles Kurzman (eds.) (2004). *An Islamic Reformation? Op. Cit.*; and Abdelwahab El-Affendi (2003). «The Elusive Reformation.» *Journal of Democracy* (14), 2, pp. 34-39.

programmes and even mosques and Quranic schools. It is also beginning to court and enlist moderate Islamists and enter into a dialogue with them<sup>7</sup>. The US, in other words, is into the religious reform business big time.

Even without such a heavy baggage, religious reform initiatives tend to face a stiff resistance. The last great authentic Islamic religious reform movement, the much maligned Wahhabism, which over the past two centuries has been compared (mainly by Western observers) both the reformation and counter-reformation,<sup>8</sup> continues to this day to face rejection by the majority of the guardians of tradition, in spite of its undisputed authentic origin and strictly literalist ethos. Wahhabism can be compared to Protestantism in its insistence on the adherence to authentic texts exclusively, and its desire to «disenchant the world» by rejecting the immanentism and spiritualism of the dominant Sufi traditions. In this regard, it has an affinity with modernity which helped its spread among the new modernising elites, but created hostility to it among the masses. Its problem was exacerbated by its close association with militant Bedouins of Eastern Arabia, and its aggressive sectarianism, which made it distasteful to the bulk of the more tolerant and more sophisticated urban populations of Arabia itself and the rest of the Muslim world. However, in somewhat diluted form, its ethos (the call for a return to the authentic sources of Islamic teachings as opposed to faithfulness to inherited traditions) continues to inform most modern revivalist initiatives and Islamist movements.

The Wahhabis are not alone in suffering a backlash because they tried to tamper with entrenched traditions. Almost any other pretender to the mantle of reform faced a similar gauntlet. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups continue to face fierce hostility from traditionalist forces, in spite of their own claims to be the most faithful adherents to Islamic doctrine. Those who wanted to openly defy established doctrine suffered an even worse fate. In 1924, a young judge and religious scholar, Ali Abd al-Raziq, published a small book in which he questioned the religious basis of the caliphate system. The reaction of the religious establishment and the wider public was so fiercely hostile (he was stripped of his scholarly degree and lost his job) that he himself never dared to repeat those claims again. And this in spite of the caliphate system having been practically dead and buried for centuries. More recently, a European would-be reformer, the philosopher Tariq Ramadan, issued a call for the controversial Islamic punishments to be suspended pending a serious debate on their applicability in modern times. Not a single Islamic scholar was prepared to publicly back his call, and this again in spite of these punishments having been practically abandoned in all but a couple of Muslim countries: «Over the past five years I have

<sup>7</sup> Cf. David E. Kaplan (2005). Hearts, Minds, and Dollars. *US News and World Report* ([www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com)), 16 April 2005. (Accessed 4 May 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ramadan by Mahmud Al-Rashid, in *Emel Magazine*, May-June, 2005, pp. 6-10.

spoken to many Muslim scholars. Some are either fearful or intimidated; others are more concerned about their status and position in society. Others have a genuine concern but not the wherewithal or the opportunity to publicly discuss this issue.»<sup>9</sup>

And the long and short of it was that no one was prepared to come out in public and support this fairly moderate call, which is in any case a ratification of the *status quo*.

Ramadan should at least be grateful that he did not suffer the fate of Abd al-Raziq, or that of more recent victims, such the Iranian intellectual Hashem Aghajari, who was sentenced to death in Iran in 2002 for advocating a self-styled reformation project. He was later pardoned. Aghajari's fellow Iranian intellectual, Abdolkarim Soroush, fared better than both, in spite of continued official harassment. He has a considerable following among young Iranian activists, and has the benefit of remaining fairly within the Islamist perspective. Soroush's central thesis hinges on a presumed distinction between religion and religious knowledge. While religion is a transcendental reality which refers to the divine, religious knowledge is eminently human and is subject to constant change. And since all that human beings can attain is mere religious knowledge, this means that any doctrine Muslims hold is tentative and provisional and could, and should, be revised to bring it in line with «religion» when the need arises<sup>10</sup>.

Other protagonists in this drama include Muhammad Shahrour, a Syrian engineer who wrote a book contesting the accepted interpretations of the Quran and Islamic history, and the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who promotes a similar revisionist line, seeking to question traditional interpretations of the Quran and *fiqh*. Abu Zayd suffered semi-official persecution when a court in his homeland Egypt declared him an apostate in 1995, and decreed a mandatory divorce from his wife. The couple were forced to flee Egypt, and they now live in exile in Holland.

In the post-September 11 era, proponents of Islamic reform became more outspoken. And not only did more individual thinkers come forward to challenge the traditional interpretations, but these thinkers also began to form organisations and networks, such the Progressive Muslims network in the US (2002) and the Liberal Islam Network in Indonesia (2001). Prominent figures in these movements include Ulil Abshar Abdalla (1967-), in Indonesia, Omid Safi of Progressive Muslims, and Khaled Abou El Fadl, Professor of Law at the UCLA School of Law. The Kuwaiti-born Abou El Fadl continues to mount a sustained barrage of criticism against traditionalist interpretations of Islam in general and Wahhabism in particular, and to call for that elusive reformation.

<sup>9</sup> Michaëlle Browers y Charles Kurzman (eds.) (2004). *An Islamic Reformation? Op. Cit.* 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush (2000). *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam, Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, (translated, edited with a critical introduction by M. Sadri and A. Sadri). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The claims of most these intellectuals are much more credible than that of Manji, and many are respectable Islamic scholars in their own right. However, as things stand, none of these individuals or movements appears to have made much headway in either appropriating a credible aura of religious authority, or attracting a substantial following. Some like Abu Zayd remain fugitives, while even prominent scholars living in the West, such as Abou El Fadl are facing serious problems. Abou El Fadl received death threats and was even excluded from his own local mosque, which happens to be run by a relatively moderate Muslim group. Worse still, while he continues to be shunned by traditional Muslims and modern Islamists, he is at the same time being accused by right wing groups of being a «stealth Islamist» rather than a genuine advocate of reform.

It might be premature to paraphrase Gellner's claim of Islam being «secularization-resistant» and add that Islam is also «reformation-resistant.» However, the fact that reform-inclined intellectuals such as Abou El Fadl, Ramadan and others continue to lack both mainstream allies and popular following is significant. And the reason why Muslim scholars are reluctant to support unconventional views is not only because of fear of the masses, although that is a factor. For there are many secular intellectuals and political leaders who not only reject orthodoxy openly, but take also practical steps to implement their views through legislation or executive fiat. For example, in Tunisia and Turkey, governments ban the wearing of headscarves for women, while the majority of Muslim governments have legalised gambling and the consumption of alcohol. However, what is at stake here is not expressing views, or even implementing policies, but bestowing religious legitimacy on these views and policies. And here we encounter the central paradox of Islamic legitimation: for if a religious scholar associated his name with a stance that is regarded as lacking legitimacy, then he would risk losing his religious and moral authority, what would be tantamount to committing moral suicide. In this case, what the scholars Ramadan approached were afraid of was not only the wrath of the masses, but the prospect of losing both their own legitimacy and their legitimacy-bestowing authority by backing Ramadan's proposals, which would then make such backing worthless.

Additional problems arise when, as is the case today, a reform initiative is so openly associated with a foreign power, and a hostile one at that. In any case, the success of such an externally driven initiative would be a novel phenomenon in human history, since this would be the first time that such a synthetic religious concoction was created and marketed successfully, not to an «unsuspecting public,» as in conspiracy theories, but to a public fully conscious of what was going on.

A further problem comes from the fact that the very societies which seek to promote and market this blend of secularism and religious tolerance appear at the moment to be in the grip of opposite tendencies of religious extremism. When the Bush administration began to express its enthusiasm for Islamic reform, the United States was perceived by Muslims to be under the control of right wing reli-

gious hardliners who are intensely hostile to Muslims. The argument has thus been made that the bearers of this initiative seek to deprive Muslims from the strength they could derive from their religious tradition, so as to favour their opponents who are adhering even more vehemently to their own.

A similar argument was deployed by Islamists against their secular Arab rivals in the 1960's. As one Islamist author put it, it all smacked of a foreign conspiracy to culturally disarm the Muslims at a time when they were facing «religiously armed» foes: «They [the Jews] proceeded to establish in the heart of our land a religious state based on national fanaticism, and for the service of this religious state, and for the service of Jewish nationalism, they hired in our countries some people to argue that the age of nationalities is at an end, and the era of peoples and humanity had dawned, and that religion is superstition, ignorance and backwardness, and renaissance can only be achieved by secularism and by waging war on Islam»<sup>11</sup>.

Similar protests are being made against proponents of liberal reform today. These criticisms are given credence by the fact that liberals tend to be apologists for America and, often, Israel as well. Irsahd Manji's book contains two and a half chapters of adulation of Israel. Such views, to paraphrase an Arab-American quoted by Kaplan<sup>12</sup>, would not wash with the bulk of Arabs even if they were ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad himself. Manji's book was condemned by one (non-Muslim critic) as «a multifaceted fraud,» mainly because the author identified too closely with Israel and the Western establishment and lacked sympathy for Muslims<sup>13</sup>. Another critic writing (irony of ironies!) on a Muslim site advocating progressive reform, was equally scathing: «Irshad Manji says her book is addressed to fellow Muslims. Had it been written in good faith, I would have understood her reasoning, even if I did not agree with her. However, her book is not addressed to Muslims; it is aimed at making Muslim haters feel secure in their thinking.»<sup>14</sup>

This goes to show that the drive to promote a religious «reformation,» far from addressing the roots of hostility between the Muslim world and the West, is going to exacerbate it.

This is also another reminder that the roots of the problem do not lie in a religious contest, but in a conflict in which religion is being used as a «weapon.» And as the Islamist critic cited above had pointed out, it was the Arabs who had

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Jalal Kishk (1968). *Al-Naksa wa'l-Ghazw al-Fikri*. El Cairo (no publicado).

<sup>12</sup> David E. Kaplan (2005). *Hearts, Minds, and Dollars*. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Justin Podur (2004). A Multifaceted Fraud: Reviewing Irshad Manji's 'Trouble With Islam'. *Muslims Wakeup!* 14 de Febrero de 2004. [http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2004/02/a\\_multifaceted.php](http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2004/02/a_multifaceted.php) (Consultado el 15 de marzo de 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Tarekh Fatah (2003). Thanks, but No Thanks: Irshad Manji's Book is for Muslim Haters, not Muslims. *Muslim Wakeup!* 27 de Noviembre de 2003. [http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2003/11/thanks\\_but\\_no.t.php](http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2003/11/thanks_but_no.t.php) (Consultado el 5 de junio de 2005).



disarmed first, seeking to base the fight for their rights on universal values of human solidarity (socialism, international legitimacy, national rights, etc.), while it was the West and its Israeli protégés who insisted on basing their claims on particularistic religious identity, divine election and a 2,000 year old religiously legitimated titles to land. It was only subsequently, the argument goes, when Muslims began to fall back on their own heritage to find strength and solace in it, that we see opponents attacking and working to undermine this tradition in order to deprive Muslims of their source of strength. It is as if the Muslims are being asked to «religiously disarm» unilaterally, just at a time when the other side was brandishing all the weapons in its religio-cultural arsenal to back its assault on Muslim regions.

### **Religious reform before the clash of values**

The debate over the «Islamic Reformation» masks a number of related debates, the most important of which is the contest over values. Part of the dilemma facing Muslims since the dawn of modernity stems not only from the sense of inferiority generated by being left behind (and later subjugated and humiliated) by the materially advancing West<sup>15</sup>, but also from a feeling of moral defensiveness in such areas as democracy, universal human rights, women's rights, etc. The issue of terrorism added just one more area in which Muslims were put on the defensive in the sphere of values.

Many leading Muslims came to appreciate and even admire western achievements in the areas of good governance and social organization, and to become envious of the values of hard work, civic commitment, etc. A number of movements arose to argue for incorporating these values into the practice of Islamic societies. A whole literature of apologetics sprang up to argue that most of these values do indeed have a firm basis within the Islamic tradition, but have only been forgotten or neglected.

At the heart of this «clash of values» is the contest over universalist claims. This is due, according to one view, to the existence of a «fault line separating the world's civilizations,» and in particular the Islamic and Western worlds which «clash for the simple reason that each claims universal validity for its particular views»<sup>16</sup>. However, from the perspective of Islam, the problem stems from a perception (or a fear) that the claim of the post-Enlightenment Western worldview to universality appears difficult to challenge, given its humanist secular orientation and its serious attempt to evolve a post-Christian moral vision. Part of the reformist rhetoric attempts to address this issue by seeking to elicit a more universalistic Islamic worldview and by attacking some parochial or narrow-

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Lewis (2002). *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Bassam Tibi (1998). *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 182.

minded Muslim positions (racism and anti-Semitism, etc.).

The «War of Ideas» apart, the Muslim world has been experiencing its own internally driven reform movements (of the «backward-looking» variety deplored by Manji). From the mid-eighteenth century, an effervescence of religious revivalist movements began to flourish in a variety of locations and places. These included the movement launched by Shah Waliullah Dehlevi (1703-1762) in India, Wahhabism in Arabia, the Mahdist movement in Sudan (1881-1898), the Sokoto caliphate of Shehu Usman dan Fodio (1754-1817) in what is today Northern Nigeria, as well as the myriad neo-Sufi movements of the same period, of which the Sanusiyya and Tijaniyya in North and West Africa are the best known<sup>17</sup>.

Even though most of these movements did stake universalist claims, some even foretelling the end of time, most had local preoccupations and did not have influence beyond their immediate areas of origin. They were also caught up in the same defensive posture *vis-à-vis* modernity which affected all Muslim traditions across the board. Only Wahhabism continued to show vitality and to grow and flourish with modernity, linking up with, and gaining strength from, the modern Islamist movements.

For whatever it is worth, the Islamists have been, together with the Wahhabis, the only plausible claimants for the mantle of reform within Sunni Islam in the modern era. The Shi'a had their own mix of modern Islamists and traditional ulama (foremost amongst whom of course is a certain Ayatollah Khomeini) vying to take up the reform mission. The varied experiences of these movements show the limitations of this exercise, even when undertaken by fervent supporters of orthodoxy. I have elsewhere elaborated in some detail on aspects of this dilemma as embodied in the experience of Hassan Turabi of Sudan<sup>18</sup>. While Turabi has been assailed by his secular critics for his dogmatism and his association with two disastrous Islamisation experiments in Sudan (under former President Gaafar Numeiri from 1977-1985 and under the current regime of Omar al-Bashir since 1989) he has also been condemned by traditionalists for his attempts to redefine Islamic orthodoxy. His support for women's rights, his questioning of the veracity and authority of some key Islamic texts and his opposition to some Islamic legal injunctions such as those pertaining to apostasy and adultery, have incurred the wrath of traditionalists. On more than one occasion, he had been forced to retract or restate his views under a heavy barrage of criticism from traditionalists. His remains the classical dilemma of the reformist: no matter how «fundamentalist» you claim to be (or is branded as), once you stray from the shores of accepted orthodoxy, you are on your own.

One of the major characteristics of contemporary Islamic reform move-

<sup>17</sup> Rex Sean O'Fahey y Bernd Radtke (1993). «Neo-Sufism reconsidered.» *Der Islam*, (70) 52-87.

<sup>18</sup> Abdelwahab El-Affendi (2006). Hassan Turabi and the Limits of Modern Islamic Reformism. In *The Blackwell Companion on Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 145-160.

ments, including Islamist movements, is the unavoidable loss of innocence. They are marked from birth by the sign of the Matrix of modernity, from which there is no escape. Their very emergence into the world signals the impossibility of the recreation of «backward looking» or inward looking reform movements. For the challenge to which they are responding has from the beginning been that of coping with modernity, which in turn means having to compete with the secular modern West on the worldly field. That had been the preoccupation of modern reformers since al-Afghani. From this perspective, reforming religion becomes not an end in itself, but the means to strengthening the community's defences against external danger.

Islamist movements thus tend to be outward looking, interested more in shaping and controlling the world around them than with the inner spiritual health of the believer and even the community. Their behaviour tends to be influenced by, and to resemble, that of their secular competitors. This stands in marked contrast with most pre-modern reform movements for whom the very notion of a religious movement concerned with worldly success would have been an anathema. Traditional reform movements may not exactly echo the remarks of the Sudanese Mahdi who defined his mission in terms of «the ruin of this world and the refurbishment of the afterlife.» However, they would usually rise in response to a dereliction of spiritual duties, often in times of prosperity and worldly success. Their concern for worldly affairs may be restricted to military matters, especially when engaging in war against corrupt regimes or foreign enemies. But the bottom line was that worldly concerns could be (even should be) sacrificed to ensure salvation through adherence to the correct teachings of religion.

The neo-Sufi movements, which began to emerge at the dawn of modernity, have already indicated a significant shift in traditional activism. While these movements continued to emphasise the spirituality and concern for individual salvation characteristic of Sufism, they made a conscious effort to conform to mainstream orthodox doctrine and practice, and often led or instigated political movements. They even established and administered states (in Libya, Asir, Sudan, etc.), which is very uncharacteristic of Sufi practice. This shift reflected internal dynamics within Muslim societies, but was also an indirect effect of modernity.

In any case, the neo-Sufi movements only had a marginal advantage over their traditional rivals in the face of the challenges of modernity, and they were forced to succumb to colonisation and even collaborate with it. It was left to modern Islamist groups to shoulder the tasks of resistance against colonialism and opposition to secularisation. The Islamists, who came largely from among the modern educated intelligentsia and had little formal grounding in traditional learning, were hostile to the traditional religious establishment which they accused of being at best incompetent and at worst a collaborator with the enemies of Islam and a tool in their hands.

In this struggle over religious and moral authority, the Islamists deployed the same weapons of their secular rivals: the assumption of a leading role in the

struggles of the time, whether against colonialism or underdevelopment or both. Just as leaders from Kamal Atatürk in Turkey to Nasser in Egypt, Bourguiba in Tunisia, the FLN in Algeria or the PLO in Palestine all built their legitimacy on the leadership of the anti-colonial struggle, Islamists had to compete in this area to have any chance of acceptance. Additionally, the Islamists claimed to lead the struggle against weakening of religion in society, a task they claim the traditional ulama should have undertaken, but were either unwilling or unable (or both) to rise to that challenge.

### **Religious authority and the «revelation moment»**

What is contested in the debate over religious reform (or any religious debate) is the locus of religious authority or, as Abou El Fadl put it, who has the right to speak in the name of God<sup>19</sup>. In order to comprehend the nature of religious authority, Weber's typology which divides authority into charismatic, traditional and legal/rational varieties may need to be slightly revised. Religious authority may qualify as traditional as well as charismatic, but it must be accepted as rational within the overall social paradigm, or what Foucault calls the «episteme,» the overall cultural/epistemological field within which specific aspects of knowledge are embedded<sup>20</sup>. In societies which believe in magic, for example, court magicians or the astrologers are regarded as professionals in the same way as the court treasurer or jester. So their authority is accepted on rational/professional grounds, rather on charismatic or traditional grounds. They have to prove themselves at every turn. There is also an element of anticipated professional competence in figures of religious authority in many societies, including modern ones. To become a bishop or an *ayatollah*, one must undergo a complex professional training, proving one's competence to peers and learning to negotiate the intricacies of institutional politics. This in turn makes their religious «authority» subject to political authority, the real locus of charisma. This inverted relationship is embodied in the status of the modern day Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Church, who is a government appointee, and is required to show competence in the running a very complex organisation, and only secondarily provide charismatic leadership.

Monotheistic religions, however, usually make the distinction highlighted in the New Testament between the function of «scribes» and that of a person with a real authority, that is between Weberian charisma and mere routinised authority derived from tradition and professional competence. Not that charisma was totally absent from the professional priesthood, but it is often held against them by the hierarchy. But since ultimate authority comes from (literally) speaking for God in

<sup>19</sup> Khaled Abou El-Fadl (2004). «Speaking, Killing and Loving in God's Name.» *The Hedgehog Review* (6), 1. In <http://www.scholarofthehouse.org/skiandloingo.html> (Consultado el 2 de diciembre de 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault (1994 [1970]). *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Nueva York: Vintage edition.

these traditions, a claimant to prophethood needed to prove that claim, usually through performing miracles and offering correct prophesies. Even then, the success rate was not encouraging, at least in the lifetime of the claimants. Many (posthumously) acknowledged Old Testament prophets had first suffered a grievous fate.

The irony is that the claim of speaking for God has to be acknowledged by the (human) recipients of the divine message for it to become effective. As a result, the content of the presumed divine message is determined by the self-constituted community which agrees to subscribe to it. And since the relevant community comes to define itself in relation to the content of that message (to be Jewish or Christian is to subscribe to a reasonably well-defined set of beliefs), it becomes difficult to alter the content of the message significantly without compromising the identity, even the very existence, of the community. A religious community that abandons its core beliefs ceases to exist as a religious community. Therefore, regardless of the claims to divine authority by those seeking to alter these beliefs, they are likely to be strongly contested. The fact Jewish communities exist today is due to successful resistance to the claims accepted by that section of the community which came to be known as Christians, and similarly, Christian communities continue to persist mainly because rival claims to divine authority have successfully been resisted.

In all such communities, religious authority must thus rest on appeals to the accepted traditions which define the identity of that group. Variations within those traditions are accepted within negotiated limits. For example, the group calling itself «Jews for Jesus» is unlikely to be considered Jewish in the same way as «Reform Judaism» is grudgingly accepted as a variation of the Jewish faith. And in all this, a complex political negotiation regarding the drawing of boundaries is involved, which ensures that religious authority actually (and paradoxically) flows from within the community and is subject to the political processes which constitute the community and keep it together.

The claimed specificity of the Islamic tradition in this regard has also to be revised within the broader picture. For example, as mentioned before, the Muslim community is seen as text-centred in a rather unique way. Islam is also regarded as unique in its claim of providing the final divine revelation, which means that any reform or change within tradition must appeal to the acknowledged components of that tradition on its own terms, since no new claim to a new divine mandate could be envisaged from within that tradition. However, in practice the other two monotheistic traditions practically also consider themselves custodians of the final divine revelation since they are so constituted as to reject any new claims to divine revelation which contradicted their core beliefs. And in any case, no credible challenge has emerged to stake such claims since Muhammad. On the other hand, many traditions within Islam, especially Sufi and Shi'i traditions, continue to make some claims to continued communication with the divine, even though any new «revelation» they come with needs to keep reasonably

within the parameters of the tradition if it were to remain credible. And, again, as mentioned before, the very construction and transmission of texts continue to be dependent on living human authority.

By the same token, the common claim that Islam has no constituted religious authority in contrast to Judaism and Christianity needs to be revised. To start with, the authority in the Christian and Jewish traditions continues to be contested through schisms and divisions, and needs to be constantly negotiated and reaffirmed. Similarly, in Islam religious authority was supposed to have been invested in the caliph, who combined in his person both spiritual and political authority. But while the normative authority of the first four caliphs had been widely accepted, the caliphate lost its claims to legitimacy quite early. Ad hoc institutions then began to crystallise around certain learning institutions, schools of ulama and self-proclaimed Sufi saints, to assume an alternative authority, which often became hereditary in founders and local leaders of Sufi brotherhoods or even ulama families.

In general, monotheistic religions define themselves in relation to a unique «revelation moment,» an actual or mythical point in history when God spoke to the world: tablets handed down at Mount Sinai, an angel appearing at Mount Hira, the «Word becoming flesh» at particular location and historical time. Any claim to religious authority must be justified in terms of closeness to that founding moment and the ability to reproduce its effects, since that moment by definition cannot be reproduced. Thus someone who possessed the original or an authentic copy of the tablets, for instance, could claim proximity to the human agency through which the revelation had been experienced. One can think of the many myths about the Ark of the Covenant in this context. A person who possessed some privileged knowledge or qualities through which the secrets of the revelation could be accessed could also claim to partake of that authority: the Disciples of Christ, the Companions of the Prophet, etc. Needless to say, such claims need to appear convincing both to the guardians of the tradition and the general body of the faithful for them to be effective.

In Islam, to reiterate, the attempts to capture the unique moment of revelation adopted two approaches, which often diverged but could be complementary at times. The first was to capture through writing the body of the revelation and also the way it manifested itself in the world, through the actions and words of the Prophet and his close followers. This compendium of the Quran (the direct word of God as revealed to the Prophet) and Sunna (the words and deeds of the Prophet illustrating how he understood and acted upon the revelation) became the authoritative body of knowledge and the ultimate court of appeal in case of differences. The other approach was primarily spiritual rather than intellectual or textual. In this approach, the believer tries to recreate the revelation moment in personal terms by looking into his/her heart to discern God's message. By attempting to immerse oneself in intensive spiritual experiences, one hoped to attain such a purity of heart as to be able to reach out to heaven and partake of the

divine.

Again, the distinction between the two approaches was not absolute. The diligent collection and compilation of texts needed to be carried out by men on an unimpeachable reputation, who were also expected to possess intense spirituality and demonstrable incorruptibility and even otherworldliness. Otherwise, they could not be trusted with the texts. Similarly, the professional men of learning, the ulama, tasked with deriving practical guidance from these texts were subjected to rigorous vetting for probity and practical commitment to the teachings of Islam. In other words, the ideal 'alim was required to be something of a saint before the masses could listen to him. This was at least the case with the founders of the main Sunni and Shi'i schools of thought, who had to prove their mettle by successfully enduring great ordeals (some were even martyred) as proof of their qualifications to be listened to. By the same token, Sufi leaders needed to demonstrate their erudition and religious learning in order for their authority to be accepted. The difference is therefore one of emphasis, rather than type, since both learning and spirituality needed to be demonstrated in both cases, but in varying degrees.

The depth of practical and spiritual commitment to the tradition demanded as a condition for being an authority explains to a great extent the predicament of those would be reformers who want to start not from a point of deep commitment to the tradition, but from a point of hostility to it.

### **The wider crisis of authority**

The much discussed current crisis in religious authority in Islam is part of a wider crisis of authority ushered by the turmoil which modernity brought to the Muslim world. In his attempt to exonerate the traditional Sunni religious establishment from responsibility for the current surge in violent radicalism within Islam, Abdal Hakim Murad reminds us of the habitual quietism of the Sunni establishment, which had often opted to collaborate with western colonialism rather than fight it. In spite of sporadic acts of resistance to colonialism by some religious leaders, «a doctrine of generic *jihad* against the West has been conspicuous by its absence» within Sunni orthodoxy<sup>21</sup>.

But this was precisely the problem. The crisis brought about by Western colonialism was the most serious faced by Muslim communities since the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and most of the ulama (and Sufi leaders) had little to say about it. That is where the vacuum in authority originated. The central crisis was brought about when the highest religio-political institution in Islam, the caliphate, not only decided to acquiesce in the foreign occupation of Ottoman lands in the wake of World War I, but also refused to grant legitimacy to the resistance then being led by Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). Ataturk became the first of a long line

<sup>21</sup> Abdal Hakim Murad (2005). «Bombing without Moonlight: The Origins of Suicidal Terrorism.» *Islamica*, (12), 59-75.

of political entrepreneurs who relied on the legitimacy of resistance to build up moral authority at the expense of the religious establishment.

Later he would use this authority not only to demolish the caliphate, but also to banish Islam from the public arena. This was a great irony, since the whole rationale for resistance to foreign domination was to safeguard cultural identity, of which the public role of religion was a constitutive element. The assault on cultural and religious identity by Ataturk was more ferocious than any undertaken by foreign occupying powers, barring the Bolsheviks in Central Asia. However, the legitimacy of resistance to foreign domination has been so powerful that it could legitimate even such internal colonialism. It has been used regularly by nationalist leaders from Sukarno in Indonesia and Bourguiba in Tunisia, to Nasser, Saddam, Asad and the Yemen Socialist party to mount similar, if less drastic assaults on tradition and claimants of religious authority, ancient and modern.

It is no coincidence, for example, that the resurgence experienced by Islamic activism in recent decades coincided with the ebb in the fortunes of secular forces and their withdrawal from the resistance business, precisely at a time when the threat of foreign domination and internal fragmentation has been at its highest since early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hamas, for instance, emerged the secular PLO appeared to have lost its the struggle for survival and was no longer a viable actor. Similarly, Islamist movements rose to take the mantle of resistance in Egypt, where the regime chose to admit defeat in its confrontation with Israel, and in Lebanon, where the state collapsed, together with the secular forces which carried the banner of resistance in the past. The waning of the fortunes of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt during the Nasser years was due only in part to the ferocious oppression by the regime. The movement stood little chance of gaining popular support at a time when Nasser was winning the adulation of the Arab masses as the most resolute champion of resistance to Israel and the West.

Similarly, the threat which Bin Laden and his jihadists pose to the West and allied Arab regimes derives not from their success in «hijacking» religious authority, since their claim to religious authority is tenuous at best. The mantle they had hijacked was that of resistance, not that of divine authority. Bin Laden would be the first to admit this, since in one of his videotaped comments he acknowledged that his followers defied traditional religious authority:

Those youths who conducted the operations did not accept any *fiqh* [...] in the popular terms, but accepted the *fiqh* that the Prophet Muhammad brought. Those young men [...] said in deeds, in New York and Washington, speeches that overshadowed all other speeches made everywhere in the world. The speeches are understood by both Arabs and non-Arabs, even by the Chinese.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Transcripts at: <http://muhammadanism.org/Terrorism/UsamaVideoTranscript.htm> (accessed 19 March



It can be thus seen here that the ultimate court to which the jihadists appeal is that of the imperative of the moment, the unavailability of the heroic act needed to save the umma from imminent annihilation. Their «ethical suspension of ethics»<sup>23</sup> is justified in terms of emergency.

This mundane principle of expediency which Machiavelli tried so famously (or notoriously) to install as the first principle of politics had been given a more recent, Islamically legitimated expression by the late Ayatollah Khomeini in his well-known principle of the «Absolute Authority of the Jurist.» According to this principle, the *raison d'état* of the Islamic state trumps all other principles, including the most basic religious principles. The reasoning was simple and straightforward enough: the Islamic state is the condition for the fulfilment of all other religious obligations; therefore, its preservation must override all other considerations, including religious norms and duties. If the leader of the Islamic state perceives a danger to its existence, and if religious teachings needed to be contravened in order to save it, according such fundamental duties as performing prayer, fasting and pilgrimage, then the leader has the authority to order the suspension of these commands and even prohibit compliance with them. In other words, the leader (*imam*) can veto all other sources of religious authority if necessity (as determined by him) dictates that.

## Conclusion

The current calls for religious reform are based on a self-contradictory premise. The argument is that the hold of religion on the masses is so strong that no progress in political or social reform can be achieved unless religion itself is reformed. But in order to reform religion, religious authority must be tamed by, and made subject to an authority outside it. But if the whole point is that religious authority is so powerful, how can it be held to account by an authority that is by definition less powerful than itself?

This paradoxical attitude to religious authority is not novel. The history of the struggle between kings and bishops in England and elsewhere offers a graphic display of this bewildering interplay of conflicting but complementary authorities. Kings could not live with bishops who wanted to have a real independent authority, but could not live without the support of some less assertive religious leaders. Thus subjugating recalcitrant bishops, or even having them killed, was necessary to consolidate royal authority, as was the symbolic coronation of the monarch by the Archbishop. The very act of appropriating ultimate religious authority by declaring the monarch, rather than the Pope, as head of the church also needed the acquiescence of the church hierarchy for it to be accepted. Thus in order to be subjugated to outside authority, religious authority must acquiesce in

2006).

<sup>23</sup> Faisal Devji (2005). *Landscapes of Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*. London: Hurst & Co, p. 118.

its own subjugation, and the exercise has also to appear credible to the wider public. If it did take the character of a «usurpation,» then it would remain very unstable.

A similar conflict has also been present in Islamic history, although attempts to contain and harness religious authority effectively for the purposes of political consolidation have been less successful. What is novel in the current situation is the attempt to harness religious authority for the purposes of an external (and hostile) political powers, simultaneously with making religion accountable to ideals originating from outside it. The perception that religion stands in need of reform stems from the same perception of the «major malfunction» of Muslim societies and their need of a major overhaul. And while the jihadist makes action and results his ultimate court of appeal, judging doctrine by its pragmatic consequences, the reformer restricts himself to the world of ideas. Both claim to harken back to the moment of revelation, to listen in their hearts for the message that confirms the path to which they have already committed themselves.

But if we were to believe Soroush, then that moment of revelation would forever remain elusive. Religious knowledge is always tentative and context-determined, and can never capture the true essence of revelation. However, this does not resolve the question about how to choose among rival claims of religious knowledge, and to determine which one is closer to the true essence of religion than its rivals. And any case, given that what humans are capable of attaining is nothing more than religious knowledge, a fact that should surely not have escaped God's notice, the category of religion here becomes irrelevant and redundant.

The irony is that listening to the authentic «voice of God» could only be attained by a person whose heart is already filled with faith. Thus it is not by «listening to God» that one attains faith, but the reverse: one can only learn to listen once one has attained to faith. Similarly, only a person immersed in faith can transmit faith to others. Religious authority comes from an «aura» of faith projected outwardly.

The biggest mistake up to now had been the illusion entertained by the reformists and their backers that religious reform could be synthetically engineered and made to order, like a drug produced by a large multi-national corporation and then administered as required. Nothing is further from the truth. And in any case, it is not the business of diplomats, secular academics or security operatives to engage into this kind of «religious engineering.» That is not what they are paid to do: to solve real problems, some of which they have created themselves. Indulgence in amateur religious pastoralism is no substitute to doing one's day job.

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#### ABSTRACT

The debate over the «Islamic Reformation» masks a number of related debates that will be analysed in the present article: the argument is often made that Islam is distinguished by the absence of a formal priesthood, which makes it easier for charismatic reformers to challenge the tradition; The argument about the contest over values. Part of the dilemma facing Muslims since the dawn of modernity stems not only from the sense of inferiority generated by being (and later subjugated and humiliated) left behind by the materially advancing West, but also from a feeling of moral defensiveness in such areas as democracy, universal human rights, women's rights, etc.; A very significant complicating factor is the fact that religious reform is at present more a demand made from the outside than from the inside of the Muslim community.

#### KEYWORDS

Islamic Reform, religious authority, crisis of authority, religious tradition.

#### RESUMEN

El debate sobre la «Reforma Islámica» oculta un número de cuestiones interrelacionadas que van a ser analizadas en el presente artículo: el argumento de que el islam se distingue por la ausencia de un clero formal, lo cual facilita a los reformistas carismáticos desafiar la tradición; el argumento sobre el enfrentamiento de valores. Parte del dilema al que hacen frente los musulmanes desde el origen de la era moderna, no sólo proviene del sentido de inferioridad generado por haberse quedado atrás (y más tarde sometidos y humillados) a causa del materialismo progresivo de Occidente, sino también por un sentimiento moral a la defensiva en asuntos como la democracia, los derechos humanos universales, los derechos de la mujer, etc. Un factor significativamente complicado es el hecho de que en la actualidad esa reforma religiosa es más una petición realizada desde el exterior que desde el interior de la propia comunidad musulmana.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Reforma islámica, autoridad religiosa, crisis de autoridad, tradición religiosa.

## الملخص

النقاش حول «الإصلاح الإسلامي» يخفي عدداً من المسائل المتصلة فيما بينها التي سيتم تحليلها في هذا المقال، وهي: الحجة التي يتم الإدعاء بها في العديد من الأحيان، القائلة بأن الإسلام يتميز بغياب رجال الدين الرسميين، وهو مظهر يسهل الأمور بالنسبة للإصلاحيين أصحاب الكاريزما لتحدي التقاليد، والحجة التي لها صلة بالمواجهة بين القيم. تتطرق هذه المواجهة من المآزق الذي يواجهه المسلمون منذ منشأ العصر الحديث. لا يعود مصدر هذه الحجة لمجرد الشعور بالدونية الناتجة عن البقاء في الوراثة (والخضوع والإهانة فيما بعد) بسبب المادية المتطورة للغرب، بل إنها تعود أيضاً للشعور بالوضع الدفاعي من الناحية الأخلاقية في مسائل مثل الديمقراطية وحقوق الإنسان العالمية وحقوق المرأة، الخ. من العناصر المعقدة والمهمة جداً مسألة أن في الوقت الحالي هذا الإصلاح الديني يعد مطلباً خارجياً أكثر من كونه مطلباً داخلياً ينطلق من المجتمع الإسلامي نفسه.

## الكلمات المفتاحية

الإصلاح الإسلامي، السلطة الدينية مقابل أزمة السلطة، التقليد الديني.