

INTRODUCTION:
THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'
– A MUSLIM QUEST FOR JUSTICE, GENDER
EQUALITY, AND PLURALISM*

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Inna 'l-laha ya'muru bi 'l-'adl wa 'l-ihsan
Indeed God commands justice ('*adl*)
and the actualization of goodness, realization of beauty (*ihsan*)

Qur'an 16:90

Come gather 'round people
wherever you roam
and admit that the waters
around you have grown
and accept it that soon
you'll be drenched to the bone.

If your time to you
is worth savin'
then you better start swimmin'
or you'll sink like a stone
for the times they are a-changin'.

*Bob Dylan*¹

Evoking the sacred message of the Qur'an and the revolutionary spirit of Bob Dylan's lyrics, this book represents the collective aspirations of a group of Muslim thinkers and activists. We realize the urgency of the changin' times in which we live, and seek to implement the Divine injunction to enact the justice ('*adl*) and goodness-and-beauty (*ihsan*) that lie at the heart of the Islamic tradition. It is the urgency of realizing that in so many places the waters around

Muslims have grown (Palestine, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Iraq, Gujarat, sub-Saharan Africa, and now the United States). It is time to start swimming in these turbulent waters, to save both ourselves and the variety and vibrancy of the Islamic tradition. It may not be an exaggeration to state that unless we succeed in doing so, the humanity of Muslims will be fully reduced to correspond to the caricature of violent zealots painted by fanatics from both inside and outside the Muslim community.

It is time to start a-changin'. It is time to acknowledge the complicated mess around us, and to aim for the implementation of the vision of justice and goodness-and-beauty that is rooted in the Qur'an. We start by admitting that it is not just our time that is worth saving, but also our very humanity, the most precious blessing we have been given by God. The conversations in this volume are an open-eyed move in that direction, one that is simultaneously optimistic and critical. What brings us together is a deep distrust of all simplistic solutions, since we are aware that complicated problems call for equally complicated analyses and answers. This book is not about arriving at convenient solutions, but rather about starting the process of getting to a viable destination. Before one gets to the destination, however, one needs to get on the path. Before one gets to the shore, one has to swim. In Dylan's prophetic words, it is time to start swimming. The progressive Muslim movement is above all an attempt to start swimming through the rising waters of Islam and modernity, to strive for justice in the midst of society.

THE MULTIPLE CRITIQUE UNDERTAKEN BY PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

Feminist scholars have introduced the useful concept of "multiple critique," an idea with great relevance for Muslims committed to social justice, pluralism, and gender justice. In short, multiple critique entails a multi-headed approach based on a simultaneous critique of the many communities and discourses that we find ourselves positioned in.² As we will document shortly, an important part of being a progressive Muslim is the determination to hold Muslim societies accountable for justice and pluralism. It means openly and purposefully resisting, challenging, and overthrowing structures of tyranny and injustice in these societies. At a general level, it means contesting injustices of gender apartheid (practiced by groups such as the Taliban) as well as the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities (undertaken by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds, etc.). It means exposing the violations of human rights and freedoms of speech, press, religion, and the right to dissent in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, Egypt, and others. More specifically, it means embracing and implementing a different vision of Islam than that offered by Wahhabi and neo-Wahhabi groups.³ A vital corollary component of our multiple critique entails standing up to increasingly hegemonic Western political, economic, and intellectual structures that perpetuate an unequal

distribution of resources around the world. This hegemony comprises a multitude of forces, among them the oppressive and environmentally destructive forces of multi-national corporations whose interests are now linked with those of neo-imperial, unilateral governments. Together they enforce policies through overwhelming military force, hammering down at the poorest people in the world with disturbing frequency. And yes, as much as it makes some Muslims uneasy to hear this, it does mean challenging certain policies of the United States and other countries that put profit before human rights, and “strategic interest” before the dignity of every human being.

At the heart of a progressive Muslim interpretation is a simple yet radical idea: every human life, female and male, Muslim and non-Muslim, rich or poor, “Northern” or “Southern,”⁴ has exactly the same intrinsic worth. The essential value of human life is God-given, and is in no way connected to culture, geography, or privilege. A progressive Muslim is one who is committed to the strangely controversial idea that the worth of a human being is measured by a person’s character, not the oil under their soil, and not their flag. A progressive Muslim agenda is concerned with the ramifications of the premise that all members of humanity have this same intrinsic worth because, as the Qur’an reminds us, each of us has the breath of God breathed into our being.⁵

Many people today who come from a whole host of religious, political, and ethnic backgrounds describe themselves as “progressives.” There is, furthermore, a nascent community of Muslim activists and intellectuals who readily identify with the term “progressive Muslims” and publicly embrace it. “Progressive,” in this usage, refers to a relentless striving towards a universal notion of justice in which no single community’s prosperity, righteousness, and dignity comes at the expense of another. Central to this notion of a progressive Muslim identity are fundamental values that we hold to be essential to a vital, fresh, and urgently needed interpretation of Islam for the twenty-first century. These themes include social justice, gender justice, and pluralism. Of course, the kind of Islamic interpretation one comes up with is largely determined by who undertakes the interpretation.

In talking about social justice, gender issues, and pluralism, we are mindful to avoid the trap in which “Islam” becomes a façade for some contemporary political ideology such as Marxism. Rather, ours is a relentless effort to submit the human will to the Divine in a way that affirms the common humanity of all of God’s creation. We conceive of a way of being Muslim that engages and affirms the humanity of all human beings, that actively holds all of us responsible for a fair and just distribution of God-given natural resources, and that seeks to live in harmony with the natural world. To put it slightly differently, being a progressive Muslim means not simply thinking more about the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet, but also thinking about the life we share on this planet with all human beings and all living creatures. Seen in this light, our relationship to the rest of humanity changes the way we think about God, and vice versa.

Throughout this book, we will time and again challenge, resist, and seek to overthrow the structures of injustice that are built into Islamic thought. These challenges cannot be conducted haphazardly, however. They must be undertaken patiently and critically. Yet the necessary and contingent element of being a progressive Muslim is the will to resist the structures of injustice that are built into the very societies in which we live. That goes for the Muslim world as well as the United States and Europe. In all cases, we strive to be social critics, rather than outright revolutionaries. We criticize not because we have stopped being Muslim (or American, or South African, or Turkish, or . . .) but precisely because we want to see all the various communities of which we are a part rise up to their highest potential of justice and pluralism.

In crucial ways, being a progressive Muslim also means being mindful and critical of the arrogance of modernity. What we mean by arrogance of modernity is an alleged teleology that posits a Hegelian, unidirectional, and inevitable march towards the end game of modern Western civilization. Progressive Muslim interpretations share this critique of modernity with other thinkers who are now commonly described as post-modern.⁶ Indeed, this is one important way in which progressive Muslims differ from the host of “modernist” Muslim thinkers in the late-nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. We no longer look to the prevalent notion of Western modernity as something to be imitated and duplicated *in toto*. In fact, we direct our critique just as much to the West as to Muslim societies. This is particularly the case in response to arrogant voices in the West that insist on the inevitability of a global march towards modernity.

It is disturbing that these arrogant voices are not only coming from certain corners of the academic community (Francis Fukuyama, Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, etc.), but are also now being echoed by the most powerful government in the world. A recent policy paper released by the United States White House titled *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, for example, is riddled with disturbing instances of hubris. According to the very first sentence of this document, there is now “a single sustainable model for national success,” based on the essential components of freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. Not many people would argue against freedom and democracy, but many progressive Muslims would point out that the foreign policy record of the United States is less than stellar in its support of democracy around the world. Time and again, the United States has supported and armed tyrannical rulers who have oppressed their own pro-democracy citizens. One could point to the U.S.-led overthrow of the pro-democratic Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, the U.S. support of the Mujahidin fighters (including Osama bin Laden) in Afghanistan during the 1980s, or the U.S.\$1.5 billion given to Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime during the Iran–Iraq War. To these, one could add the more recent examples of U.S. support of anti-democratic Parvez Musharraf in Pakistan, and support for Hosni Mubarak’s regime when the Egyptian government imprisoned the noted pro-democracy reformer Dr. Saad Eddin

Ibrahim. Democracy would indeed be a worthy goal if we in the United States actually pursued it globally, and if we truly believed that other people should have the choice to decide for themselves as to whether or not they should embrace it. As Gandhi himself stated, “I would heartily welcome the union of East and West provided it is not based on brute force.”⁷

It is the third component of this “single sustainable model,” an element benignly called “free enterprise,” that drives much of *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Later on, the document further boasts, “Free trade and free markets have proven their ability to lift whole societies out of poverty.” Where are these “whole societies” that have allegedly been lifted out of poverty? Nowhere is there an acknowledgement of or engagement with North/South divisions, or the myriad ways in which globalization has worked to make some of the rich super-rich, and the super-poor even poorer.

Another equally disturbing example of the essential arrogance that (mis)-informs *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* is the call for a single system of morality. The President of the United States is here quoted as stating, “Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities.”⁸ Just whose system of morality is it that we are to abide by here? That of the President of the United States? Right-wing evangelical Christians? Tibetan Buddhists? Catholics? Secular Humanists? The implication is clear: according to this document, just as there is now (or so we are told) one sustainable model of national success, there is now one single acceptable system of morality. And it is the President of the United States (and his advisors) who get to determine what that is. It is precisely such a hegemonic discourse that progressive Muslims would challenge, in the same way that we reject the arrogant authoritarian discourse of Muslim literalist-exclusivists.⁹

PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS AND THE ENGAGEMENT WITH TRADITION IN LIGHT OF MODERNITY

The attempt to reflect critically on the heritage of Islamic thought and to adapt it to the modern world is of course nothing new. At the opposite ends of the spectrum of contemporary Muslims grappling with tradition one finds rigid extremes – on one side a steadfast conservative traditionalism, and on the other a knee-jerk rejectionism of the traditional Muslim heritage by certain Muslim modernists. Conservative traditionalism sees all Muslims as bound by what it deems the authoritative juridical or theological decisions of the past. The rejectionist perspective argues that there is now an epistemological rupture with the past so severe as to warrant throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Among other points, this modernist perspective calls for abolishing the Islamic legal and theological schools of thought (*madhahib*, sing. *madhhab*).

Most Muslims today recognize that neither extreme is fully viable. The two positions represent above all idealized camps from which the adherents of the two schools of thought shout at each other. Most of us find ourselves in the gloriously messy middle where real folks live and breathe. One of many commonalities between the conservative traditionalists and the modernists is that they both have had a difficult time attracting many ordinary Muslims, especially at a communal level. The edicts of those who would wish to see twenty-first-century Muslims bound by all medieval juridical decisions have seemed too restrictive to many. On the other hand, many modernists have simply not appeared authentically “Muslim” enough to most Muslims. This has had less to do with their personal piety (or lack thereof), than with the fact that their interpretations have not sufficiently engaged Islamic sources.

Progressive Muslims seek to learn from the deficiencies of both of these ideologies, in order to get past the slogan games. The challenge is not to find some magical, mythical middle ground, but rather to create a safe, open, and dynamic space, where guided by concerns for global justice and pluralism, we can have critical conversations about the Islamic tradition in light of modernity.¹⁰ A wonderful Jewish friend of Muslims, Rabbi Zalman Schachter, perhaps said it best: “Tradition has a vote, not a veto.”¹¹

It is our hope that the book you hold in your hand marks a new chapter in the rethinking of Islam in the twenty-first century. Our aim has been to envision a socially and politically active Muslim identity that remains committed to ideals of social justice, pluralism, and gender justice. The aim here is not to advocate our own understanding as uniquely “Islamic” to the exclusion of the past fourteen hundred years of Islamic thought and practice. This is not a tyrannical attempt to insist that standing here at the threshold of the twenty-first century, we finally “got it right”! No, warts and all, from its glorious nobility to misogyny, there has always been a spectrum of interpretations in Islam. We seek to locate ourselves as part of that broader conversation, not to collapse the spectrum. But ours is not a passive, relativist locating of our own voices. Being progressive also means to issue an active and dynamic challenge to those who hold exclusivist, violent, and misogynist interpretations. Traditions do not arrive from heaven fully formed, but are subject to the vicissitudes of human history. Every tradition is always a tradition-in-becoming, and Islam is no exception. Our aim is to open up a place in the wider spectrum of Islamic thought and practice for the many Muslims who aspire to justice and pluralism. This will entail both producing concrete intellectual products and changing existing social realities.

Progressive Muslims are concerned not simply with laying out a fantastic, beatific vision of social justice and peace, but also with transforming hearts and societies alike. A progressive commitment implies by necessity the willingness to remain engaged with the issues of social justice as they unfold on the ground level, in the lived realities of Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Vision and

activism are both necessary. Activism without vision is doomed from the start. Vision without activism quickly becomes irrelevant.

Allow me to elaborate what I understand to be the key agenda items of progressive Muslims. But before I get to that, let me shatter any illusion that the following is meant as a “progressive Muslim manifesto.” While it is the case that the fifteen contributors to this volume have been involved in many intense and fruitful conversations, I wish to make it very clear that there are substantial differences of opinion among us. This is as it should be. I cannot – and do not – advocate my own understanding of progressive Islam as canonical. Indeed, that notion runs against the progressive Muslims’ model of the fluid exchange of ideas and the acknowledging of a wide spectrum of interpretations. The following, therefore, represents my own reflections on being a progressive Muslim. Others in this volume would no doubt add many more items, and would perhaps take exception to some of my formulations.

ESSENTIAL CONCERNS OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

Engaging Tradition

Progressive Muslims insist on a serious engagement with the full spectrum of Islamic thought and practices. There can be no progressive Muslim movement that does not engage the very “stuff” (textual and material sources) of the Islamic tradition, even if some of us would wish to debate what “stuff” that should be and how it ought to be interpreted. The engagement with the weight of the tradition might be uneasy at times, occasionally inspiring, now and then tedious, and sometimes even painful. Still, we believe that it is imperative to work through inherited traditions of thought and practice. In particular cases, we might conclude that certain pre-existing interpretations fail to offer us sufficient guidance today. However, we can only faithfully claim that position after – and not before – a serious engagement with the tradition. To move beyond certain past interpretations of Islam, we have to go critically through them.

It is not difficult to find progressives from a Muslim background who tackle issues of social justice, disparate distribution of wealth, oppression of Muslim women, etc. However, it has been our experience that too often such activism lacks the necessary engagement with the specifics of Islamic tradition. Such programs for social reform could just as easily come from Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Secular Humanist, or agnostic progressives. Perhaps this partially explains why the progressive agenda has held little appeal for many Muslims worldwide, who have correctly detected that those who espouse these otherwise valuable teachings are simply giving an “Islamic veneer” to ideologies such as Marxism. Some have leveled charges in the past that Muslim voices speaking up for justice are simply parroting the secular ideology of socialism dressed up in Qur’an and *hadith*. To state the obvious, a progressive Muslim

agenda has to be both progressive and Islamic, in the sense of deriving its inspiration from the heart of the Islamic tradition. It cannot survive as a graft of Secular Humanism onto the tree of Islam, but must emerge from within that very entity. It can receive and surely has received inspiration from other spiritual and political movements, but it must ultimately grow in the soil of Islam.

We hold that some interpretations of Islam in both the past and the present have been part of the problem. We also assert that ongoing interpretations and implementations of Islamic ethics guided by justice and pluralism can be part of the solution. To introduce an Islamic term, one might state that the progressive Muslim project represents an ongoing attempt at an Islamic *ijtihad*, or committed critical thinking based on disciplined but independent reasoning, to come up with solutions to new problems. This progressive *ijtihad* is our jihad. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the term “jihad” is all too familiar to most people. To both the Muslim fanatic and the Muslim-hating xenophobe, jihad is simply “holy war” declared by Muslims against Westerners. For the Muslim apologist, jihad is instead purely the inner struggle against one’s own selfish tendencies. Neither interpretation takes into consideration the possibility of engaging and transforming the social order and the environment in a just and pluralistic fashion that affirms the humanity of us all.

It is vitally important to recognize that “jihad” is etymologically related to the concept of *ijtihad*. In Arabic, concepts that share the same trilateral etymological derivation are essentially linked to one another. “Jihad” and *ijtihad* both come from the root *ja-ha-da*, meaning “to strive,” “to exert.”¹² For progressive Muslims, a fundamental part of our struggle (*jihad*) to exorcise our inner demons and bring about justice in the world at large is to engage in a progressive and critical interpretation of Islam (*ijtihad*).

An essential part of the progressive *ijtihad* is to account for and challenge the great impoverishment of thought and spirit brought forth by Muslim literalist-exclusivists. Groups such as the Wahhabis have bulldozed over not just Sufi shrines and graveyards of the family of the Prophet in Arabia, but also whole structures of Islamic thought. As some of the essays in this volume – especially that by Khaled Abou El Fadl – make clear, there is an urgent need for progressive Muslims to problematize, resist, and finally replace the lifeless, narrow, exclusivist, and oppressive ideology that Wahhabism poses as Islam. I view Wahhabism – amplified by hundreds of billion dollars in petrodollars and supported by the same U.S. government that claims to support democracy and freedom in the Muslim world – as the single greatest source of the impoverishment of contemporary Islamic thought. Yet ours is not simply an “anti-Wahhabi” Islam. That would be to remain in the realm of the polemical and oppositional. There is no option of going back to the eighteenth century prior to the rise of the Wahhabis, nor would that be desirable. As with all other modes of injustice and oppression, we have to identify Wahhabism and oppose it before we can rise above it. This aspect of the progressive Muslim agenda yet

again identifies the necessity of remaining engaged with the very stuff of Islam, past and present.

One should add here that Wahhabism is not the only brand of Islamic literalism-exclusivism, and our task as progressives is to resist all of them. In doing so, it is imperative for progressive Muslims to resist the oppressive ideology of Wahhabism, but equally important to avoid the trap of dehumanizing the Wahhabi-oriented human beings. If we dehumanize and demonize them, we have lost something valuable in our quest to acknowledge the humanity of all human beings. Gandhi was right: "It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself, for we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of one and the same Creator."¹³ This is a great challenge.

Social justice

There have, of course, long been Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, avowed atheists, and others involved in many social justice issues. Increasingly, they now find themselves standing shoulder to shoulder with new Muslim friends. The term "social justice" may be new to some contemporary Muslims, but what is not new is the theme of justice in Islam. Justice lies at the heart of Islamic social ethics. Time and again the Qur'an talks about providing for the marginalized members of society: the poor, the orphan, the downtrodden, the wayfarer, the hungry, etc.

It is time to "translate" the social ideals in the Qur'an and Islamic teachings in a way that those committed to social justice today can relate to and understand. We would do well to follow the lead of Shi'i Muslims who from the start have committed to standing up for the downtrodden and the oppressed. Everyone knows that Muslims have always stood for the theme of Divine unity. Yet how many people have also realized that the Mu'tazilites (who have greatly affected Shi'i understandings of Islam) so valued justice that they identified themselves as the folk of "Divine Unity and Justice" (*ahl al-tawhid wa 'l-'adl*)?¹⁴ In the Sunni tradition, there is a vibrant memory of the Prophet repeatedly talking about how a real believer is one whose neighbor does not go to bed hungry. In today's global village, it is time to think of all of humanity as our neighbor. The time has come for us to be responsible for the well-being and dignity of all human beings if we wish to be counted as real believers. To borrow a metaphor from our Christian friends, we are all our brothers' and our sisters' keepers now.

The time has come to stand up and be counted. As Muslims and as human beings, we stand up to those who perpetuate hate in the name of Islam. We stand up to those whose God is a vengeful monster in the sky issuing death decrees against the Muslim and the non-Muslim alike. We stand up to those whose God is too small, too mean, too tribal, and too male. We stand up to those who apologetically claim that the beautiful notions of universal

brotherhood and sisterhood in the Qur'an have somehow made Muslim societies immune to the ravages of classism, sexism, and racism. To all of these, we say: not in my name, not in the name of my God will you commit this hatred, this violence. We stand by the Qur'anic teaching (5:32) that to save the life of one human being is to have saved the life of all humanity, and to take the life of one human being is to have taken the life of all humanity. That which you do to my fellow human beings, you do to me.

And yet again we recall that ours is a multiple critique, one of engaging and challenging all the ideologies and institutions of injustice and inequality in the various communities in which we find ourselves. This means standing up to those who support and benefit from the Western hegemony over the rest of the world. The time has come for us to stand up to those who look at the world not as a single human family, but as "us" versus "them." The time has come to stand up to those who look down at others through an imperialist lens, those who favor a "globalization" that works to the exclusive benefit of multi-national corporations at the detriment of ordinary citizens. The time has come to stand up to those who proliferate the structures whereby five percent of the world's population consumes twenty-five percent of its resources, while tens of millions perish in agonizing starvation. The time has come to stand up to drug companies who clutch their patents of HIV drugs while untold millions die of AIDS in Africa and elsewhere. The time has come to stand up to those who are rightly outraged at the murder of innocent civilians in the U.S.A. and allied countries, but easily dismiss the murder of innocent civilians in other countries as "unfortunate collateral damage." To all of them, we say: not in my name will you commit these acts of violence that result in the death of so many innocents. That which you do to my fellow human beings you do to me.

The time has come, and that time is now. We cannot start committing to social justice tomorrow, because the tomorrow of social justice is the tomorrow of "I will lose fifteen pounds": it will never come. There is only today. We are, as the Sufis say, children of the present moment (*ibn al-waqt*). It is in this present moment we live, and in this present moment we have the choice to be fully human. It is for our decisions in this very present that we are held cosmically accountable, and will answer to God Almighty. Justice starts now, starts at this present moment, and it starts with each of us.

Gender Justice

Progressive Muslims begin with a simple yet radical stance: the Muslim community as a whole cannot achieve justice unless justice is guaranteed for Muslim women. In short, there can be no progressive interpretation of Islam without gender justice.

Let us be clear that by "gender" we are not just talking about women. Far too often Muslims forget that gender injustice is not just something that oppresses

women, it also debases and dehumanizes the Muslim males who participate in the system.

Let us be clear that by “gender” we don’t mean to focus exclusively on the *hijab* (head covering worn by some Muslim women). The *hijab* is, no doubt, one important marker of identity for many Muslim women who choose either to wear or not to wear it. It is also an important marker of social regulations when many Muslim women are forced to wear it. But it is futile to engage in conversations about gender that reduce all of women’s religiosity and existence to the *hijab*. There are many more fundamental issues at stake in the social constructions that affect the lives of both men and women, and we aim here to engage many of them.

Some of the essays in this volume probe exactly what we mean by gender justice. The essays by Sa’diyya Shaikh, Zoharah Simmons, Scott Kugle, and Kecia Ali break new ground here. Muslim feminism is the radical notion that Muslim women are full human beings. The human and religious rights of Muslim women cannot be “granted,” “given back,” or “restored” because they were never ours to give – or take – in the first place. Muslim women *own* their God-given rights by the simple virtue of being human.

Gender justice is crucial, indispensable, and essential. In the long run, any progressive Muslim interpretation will be judged by the amount of change in gender equality it is able to produce in small and large communities. It is for this reason that I have placed “gender” as the lynchpin of our subtitle for the whole volume. Gender equality is a measuring stick of the broader concerns for social justice and pluralism.

No doubt this heavy emphasis on issues of gender – issues that far too many Muslims would rather shove under the rug, or at least deal with in the happy and unhappy confines of their own communities – will strike some as unbalanced. We are mindful of the ways in which conversations about gender are at the center of group dynamics and politics in Muslim communities. But it is way past the time to be squeamish.

There have of course been feminist movements in the Muslim world which have drawn inspiration largely from secular sources. Those movements have opened some doors, and we look to open still others. We strive for what should be legitimately recognized as Islamic feminism. If that strikes some people as an oxymoron, we unapologetically suggest that it is their definition of Islam that needs rethinking, not our linkage of Islam and feminism.

Pluralism

In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. published a monumental essay titled “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos Or Community?” Dr. King ended this essay by stating, “We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation.”¹⁵ We too believe that as members of a single humanity, as people of faith, and as progressive Muslims, we have a choice, a choice we need to make today and every day.

Pluralism is the great challenge of the day not just for Muslims, but for all of humanity: can we find a way to celebrate our common humanity not in spite of our differences but *because* of them, through them, and beyond them? Can we learn to grow to the point where ultimately “we” refers not to an exclusivist grouping, but to what the Qur’an calls the *Bani Adam*, the totality of humanity?¹⁶ Challenging, undermining, and overthrowing the pre-Islamic tribal custom of narrowly identifying oneself with those who trace themselves to the eponymous founder of a tribe, the Qur’an here describes all of humanity as members of one super-tribe, the human tribe. This is a great challenge, and yet what choice do we have but to rise up to meet it?

Can we live up to the challenge issued to us by the Prophet Muhammad, and rephrased so beautifully by the Persian poet Sa’di? Can we envision each other as members of one body, to feel the pain of another as our own? Only then will we be worthy of the name “human being.”

*Human beings are like members of one body
created from one and the same essence.
When one member feels pain,
the rest are distraught.
You, unmoved by the suffering of others,
are unworthy of the name human!*¹⁷

These days, of course, a lack of pluralism goes far beyond simple disagreement. All too often, fanatic bigotry finds expression in brutal violence. At times, this violence is deployed by paramilitary terrorist groups. At other times, it is unleashed by nation-states and their armies. Along with the overwhelming majority of Muslims, progressive Muslims stand firmly against all attacks on civilians, whether that violence comes from a terrorist group or a nation-state. Does it matter to those who have lost loved ones whether the instrument of death was held by a terrorist or a state-sponsored army? The twentieth century was by far the bloodiest in the history of humanity. May it be that in the twenty-first century – admittedly already off to a rocky start – we find a path to pluralism and a peace rooted in justice. I am often inspired by the courageous words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who stated:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.

Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it... Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate....

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Muslims no less prominent than the incomparable Rumi have also echoed this emphasis on nonviolence, “Washing away blood with blood is impossible, even absurd!”¹⁸ The humane vision of pluralism articulated so eloquently above is a powerful issue for contemporary Muslims. It is no exaggeration to say that Muslims, for so long members of a pluralistic civilization that turned everyday interpersonal ethics into a choreographed exchange of civility, kindness, and generosity, are in real danger of losing their manners. It may seem odd to hear activists talk about the importance of manners, but I firmly hold that one of the most important measuring sticks of pluralism for us Muslims is the way that we treat each other. It is past time for us to restore the humaneness of interpersonal ethics (*adab*).

Years ago, I had the pleasure of running one of those errands that graduate students in top-notch university programs are called upon to perform: drive a famous speaker to the airport. The speaker in this case was the renowned French expert on religious fundamentalism, Gilles Kepel, who had just given a great lecture comparing Jewish, Christian, and Islamic fundamentalisms. We had some time before his plane took off, so we sat in a café at the airport, and talked for a while. He was reminiscing about his travels to many parts of the world, and his interactions with various Abrahamic fundamentalists. At one point he leaned over and said, “You know what all three groups have in common?” I feverishly raced through my mind to find the most up-to-date theoretical articulation, but fortunately decided to remain silent and yield to this wise expert. He leaned over and said (in a wonderfully thick French accent), “They all have such bad *adab*!”

Ah, *adab*. . . that most essential, basic, and glorious of Muslim interpersonal codes. *Adab* is the compassionate, humane, selfless, generous, and kind etiquette that has been a hallmark of refined manners in Muslim cultures. Almost anyone who has ever traveled to areas that have been profoundly influenced by Muslim ethics has no doubt seen great examples of this wonderful way of being welcomed and put at ease.

It is precisely this compassionate humaneness that is missing from so much of contemporary Islam. Sadly, some of us Muslims are often quite rude to one another: not only do we brand each other as infidels, we oppress each other, we also cut each other off in speech, and are quick to anger. Words like *kufr* (infidelity), *shirk* (associating partners with God, i.e. polytheism), and *bid'a* (heretical innovation) flow far too easily from our tongues. The finger that used to point up at the end of prayers towards the Heavens now points most frequently at another Muslim. That same index finger that used to be a reminder of Divine Unity (*tawhid*) is now a symbol of accusation and *takfir* (branding another an infidel). What we are losing in all of this incivility is our very humanity. Here again Gandhi had a keen observation: “As soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion over-riding morality.”¹⁹

I suggest that this is one example where one of the strands of Islamic thought and practice, Sufism, has much to offer us. *Al-tasawwuf kulluhu al-adab*: All of Sufism is adab. Here I am not talking about formal initiation into Sufi orders, or elaborate cosmological speculations about the reflection of the loftiest heavenly realities in the very soul of humanity. Though there are many of us who are drawn to those aspects of Sufism as well, what I am pointing to here is something much simpler, and perhaps ultimately much more urgent. As much as any group of Muslims, the Sufis have attempted to cultivate this interpersonal ethic at a communal level, and we would do well to cherish their *adab* yet again.

There is a lovely story that I recall from my childhood, a tale told of the great Sufi master Bayazid Bistami. Bayazid's abode was flanked by a Zoroastrian (thus, non-Muslim) on one side, and a rather fanatical Muslim on the other. The Zoroastrian was quite fond of Bayazid and his gentle manners. The fanatic Muslim, on the other hand, never tired of bothering the Zoroastrian, and would periodically challenge him by saying, "If you like Bayazid so much, you should become Muslim!" One day the poor Zoroastrian snapped back,

*"If being a Muslim is what Bayazid is,
then I am not worthy of that.*

*But if being a Muslim is what you are,
Then I don't want to be that!"*

Part of pluralism is measured by openness to engage sources of compassion and wisdom, no matter where they originate. No less a figure than Hazrat 'Ali, the first Shi'i Imam and the fourth Sunni Caliph, has stated that one should evaluate a statement based on what it says, not who says it. The great Muslim philosopher al-Kindi stated, "We should not be ashamed to acknowledge truth and to assimilate it from whatever source it comes to us, even if it is brought to us by former generations and foreign peoples. For him who seeks the truth there is nothing of higher value than truth itself; it never cheapens or abases him who reaches for it, but ennobles and honors him."²⁰ At times it is easier to hear first other wisdom traditions that have elaborated on certain themes before returning "home" to seek out long marginalized and exiled sub-traditions. Studying Christian liberation theology, for example, might ultimately help us recover voices that speak out on behalf of the oppressed in Islam. Taking a close look at Taoist teachings might remind us of long-forgotten Islamic teachings on the necessity of living in harmony with nature. I am not here talking about becoming a liberation theologian of Christianity, or a Taoist. Rather, we sometimes need a refresher course to remind us that such concerns have also been part of the spectrum of interpretation in Islamic thought. Our task could then consist of bringing back to the foreground concerns that have fallen off the radar, so to speak.

Living in the twenty-first century, I urge Muslims to consider that it is no longer sufficient to study only the Qur'an and *hadith*. In addition to those essential founts of wisdom, we need to be conversant with Rumi and Ibn al-'Arabi, Plato and Ibn Sina, Ghazzali and Hazrat 'Ali, Chomsky and Abu Dharr, Gandhi and Arundhati Roy, Rabi'a and Maya Angelou, Robert Fisk and Edward Said, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Elie Wiesel, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, Sa'di and Hafez, Qawwals of South Asia and Eqbal Ahmed, and of course Bob Dylan and Bob Marley.²¹ A friend was joking with me about the above, saying that we are all going to need bigger desks, bigger book shelves, bigger CD cases, bigger mp3 files. . . . Yes, all these things must be expanded. And bigger hearts, and bigger intellects too. As big as humanity.

IS THIS AN "ISLAMIC REFORMATION"?

When confronted with the challenging issues that we engage in this volume, some people have asked us if we envision this as a sort of "Islamic reformation." The question is usually asked seriously, and it deserves a serious answer. The answer is both yes and no.

There are progressive Muslims, like the courageous scholar Abdullahi an-Na'im, who argue passionately for the usefulness of the term "Islamic reformation."²² It is undeniably true that there are serious economic, social, and political issues in the Muslim world that need urgent remedying. It is equally true that these changes will take time, and it is also likely that they will be extremely difficult to achieve, as the recent experiences of the courageous reformers in Iran so amply demonstrates. Much of the Muslim world is bound to a deeply disturbing economic structure in which it provides natural resources (most importantly in the Middle East, of course, oil) for the global market, while at the same time remaining dependent on Western labor, technological know-how, and staple goods. This economic situation is exacerbated in many parts of the modern Muslim world by atrocious human rights situations, crumbling educational systems, and worn out economies. If one is talking about a reformation that would address all of those levels, then I would suspect that most progressive Muslims would readily support that usage of the term.

However, at least in some people's usage the term "reformation" carries considerably more baggage than that. Based on these connotations, there are good reasons to resist the language of "Islamic reformation." In speaking of the "Islamic reformation," many people have in mind the Protestant Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther. It is this understanding that leaves many of us uneasy. Ours is not a project of developing a "Protestant" Islam distinct from a "Catholic" Islam. I for one am very dubious about thinking that other religious traditions (in this case Islam) must necessarily follow the historical and cultural course of action laid out by the Christian tradition. Many of us insist that we are not looking to create a further split within the Muslim community so much as to

heal it and to urge it along. Furthermore, embedded in the very language of “Reformation” is the notion of a significant break with the past. I would suggest that the progressive Muslim project is not so much an epistemological rupture from what has come before as a fine-tuning, a polishing, a grooming, an editing, a re-emphasizing of this and a correction of that. In short, it is a critical engagement with the heritage of Islamic thought, rather than a casual bypassing of its accomplishments. In some of the essays in this volume you will notice authors spending a great deal of time working through passages of the Qur’an, medieval legal texts, political philosophers, and contemporary writings. 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, uneasy engagement with the tradition.

None of the attempts to add nuance to the term “reformation” has prevented some members of the media from using the term to describe certain Muslim progressives. One, the Iranian progressive Muslim thinker Abdolkarim Soroush, was even branded the Iranian Luther!²³ Comments like this tell us a great deal about the reporters who create such leaps of logic, revealing their fanciful wishes that a single intellectual can (as the title of the above article on Soroush reads) “shake the foundations of Islam.” At least in our group of progressive Muslims, there are no would-be Luthers. There *are*, however, Ebrahim Moosa and Zohara Simmons, Sa’diyya Shaikh and Farish Noor, etc., and that is what matters here. Let us engage issues, not attempt to mold one another into the shape of long dead icons.

There is one other reason that I do not favor the language of “Islamic reformation.” Not long ago, I was asked to give a talk on Islamic aesthetics at a leading liberal arts college in North America. After a wonderful reception from the audience, the talk turned – as it invariably does – to contemporary politics, and more specifically to the agenda that progressive Muslims might have to offer as a way forward. A well-intentioned person in the audience asked what I thought of the fact that many economic and social factors (rise of the middle class, increase in literacy, etc.) had to be in place *before* the Protestant Reformation could occur in Europe. The answer came clear to my heart: we cannot wait. There are clearly far too many places in the Muslim world that suffer from an appalling lack of literacy, huge and ever-growing socio-economic gaps between the “haves” and the “have nots,” political tyranny, religious exclusivism, gender injustice, etc. In some cases, prognosticators have predicted that it may take decades, if not centuries, for the Muslim world to “catch up.” As progressive Muslims, we simply cannot wait. We do not have the luxury of sitting idly by in the vague hope that changes will take place *before* we start dealing with these difficult issues. In my reading of the Qur’anic call, we are all held accountable by God for the opportunities we are given in this life, and asked to answer for how we responded to them. Our responsibility of *khilafa* (vicegerency, stewardship) deals with the here and now, not twenty years from

now, not two hundred years. We are children of this moment (*ibn al-waqt*), and have to work within the societies in which God has placed us.

Having gone into some depth about the salient features of progressive Muslims, let me also take some time to describe what progressive Muslims are not about.

PROBLEMS WITH THE TERM “PROGRESSIVE”

Since I know some are going to make this same criticism, let me beat them to the punch. All of us who have contributed to this volume realize that the term “progressive” Muslim is far from perfect. Let us be honest, and admit that it has been a very abused term.

The real issue with “progressive,” of course, is that problematic “progress” embedded so deeply in it. Progress towards what, one may ask? Progress has all too often been conceived of as a Hegelian, unilateral march towards post-Enlightenment, rational, male, Euro-American civilization. Wasn’t the twentieth century allegedly the century of progress? While no doubt it witnessed the rise of many technological wonders, it also turned out to be among the most hateful and bloody in human history.

In the past 150 years of Islamic thought, a number of people have called for a whole host of “reform”- and “progress”-oriented interpretations of Islam, but in many cases these have proven to be nothing more – nor less – than a simple aping of the most recent Western trends. Furthermore, the term “progressive,” at least in the minds of some people, has a slightly elitist connotation, implying that the “progressives” are somehow better, smarter, or more advanced than the alleged “non-progressives.”

So why use the term? Can’t we find something better? Well, actually we tried. Unfortunately, none of the alternatives was totally problem-free.

Some suggested the label “liberal Muslim.” It is certainly true that on many social issues most of us find ourselves on the “left,” so to speak. But many progressive Muslims also do not agree with the connotation of liberal as “loose, not strict,” as if progressives are only *loosely* Muslim, and they can be progressive only because they are not *strictly* following Islamic teachings. Furthermore, in our view many self-declared “liberal Muslims” have been too enamored with modernity, too eager to identify themselves wholeheartedly with European and American structures of power. In the end, they have proven unable and unwilling to adopt a critical stance against the injustices of *both* Muslim societies *and* Western hegemony. It is precisely such a critical stance that we have identified here as multiple critique.

Another suggestion was “critical Muslims,” which has the great appeal of calling attention to the desperate need for critical thought. The problem is that in many non-academic circles, the term “critical” is taken to refer to those who criticize. It is certainly true that we critique many contemporary and historical

Islamic practices and interpretations, but we always do so with an eye toward more just and pluralistic alternatives. “Critical Muslims” can sound like a bunch of whiners who sit around and complain. For some, the term “critical Muslim” also implies pontificating about Islam without the attempt to change realities in Muslim societies on the ground level.

It is not just that the other terms had problems. There is something about this term “progressive.” It is more than anything else an umbrella term that signifies an invitation to those who want an open and safe space to undertake a rigorous, honest, potentially difficult engagement with tradition, and yet remain hopeful that conversation will lead to further action.

We felt adamant that the title of this work should be “Progressive Muslims,” and not “Progressive Islam.” The distinction may be irrelevant to some, but it matters a great deal to us. On one hand, as one of the contributors to this volume has stated, “Islam has always been progressive. It is Muslims that have not always been so.” On the other hand, we are also wary of falling into the easy dichotomy of “I love Islam, it is those darn Muslims that I have a problem with.” For better or worse, in truth and ignorance, in beauty and hideousness, we call for an engagement with real live human beings who mark themselves as Muslims, not an idealized notion of Islam that can be talked about apart from engagement with those real live human beings. Even if we take Islam in the most ordinary sense of submission to the Divine, there can be no Islam without the humanity who is doing the submitting. Take humanity out of the equation, and all we are left with is the God who stands prior to and beyond Creation. About that understanding of God no human being is perhaps qualified to speak, since for them to speak they would have to exist, thus implying by necessity the very act of creation. But in terms of a relationship between humanity and the Divine, Islam cannot be interpreted, experienced, or articulated without engaging with real live human beings. To keep the focus on the responsibilities of human beings, we have titled this volume “Progressive Muslims,” rather than “Progressive Islam.”

WHERE DID THIS PARTICULAR GROUP OF PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS COME FROM?

The volume you hold in your hand is the result of almost an entire year of conversation, dialogue, and debate among the fifteen contributors. It had its real genesis in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, in what we saw as the urgent need to raise the level of conversation, and to get away from the standard apologetic presentations of Islam. During the past year, we have exchanged some six hundred email messages and spent countless hours on the telephone in an effort to harmonize our endeavors.

One of the key points about this volume is that it represents Muslim intellectuals and activists whose understanding of Islam has been shaped by the

academic study of Islam in Western institutions. To understand the significance of this point, it is important to recognize the wider ramifications for the Muslim world of the decline of the traditional Islamic universities (*madrasas*).

One of the real challenges facing Muslim communities around the world has been the marked decline of the madrasa system. Many scholars have directly attributed this decline to the impact of European colonialism, positing that the colonial system undermined the relevance and prestige of Islamic education in favor of more technological and scientific institutions. In places like North Africa, the colonial powers actually shut down some of the most prestigious institutions of higher Islamic learning. This much is certainly clear: in many places around the Muslim world, madrasa institutions are no longer the center of creative, critical thinking. In the pre-modern world, the very brightest Muslim minds (at least the male ones, since the females were usually relegated to education at home²⁴) were to be found in the madrasas. The traditional curriculum was based on the memorization of the foundational texts (Qur'an, etc.), and learning the rigorous methodology by which one could arrive at a religious opinion. How strange it must seem to many modern Muslims to read a pre-modern theologian like Ghazzali offer an opinion in such a fashion: The following group holds this opinion, while group 2 states something to the contrary. Group 3 is still different, holding to such-and-such a belief, while group 4 follows this practice. As for myself (i.e., Ghazzali himself), I find myself in accordance with the views of the third group.

How refreshing! How intellectually honest, to summarize the perspectives of various schools of thought, to legitimize a range of opinions and to acknowledge a spectrum of interpretations! It is then, and only then, that a learned scholar like Ghazzali would situate himself in that wider spectrum. Such a willingness to undertake self-positioning may not have been the norm, but it was utilized by some of the leading pre-modern Muslim thinkers. How different is this attitude from so many contemporary Muslim pundits who hijack an entire tradition, claiming to be a one-man (and it is almost always a man) spokesperson for all Muslims: "Islam states..." No debate, no discussion, no spectrum of perspectives. The Almighty Islam has spoken, or so we are told, and the conversation is over.

It is above all the rigor displayed by pre-modern thinkers like Ghazzali that is sorely missing from contemporary madrasa training. With few exceptions (Iran, for example), the brightest minds in the Muslim world are no longer found in madrasas. Instead, they are training to be doctors, engineers, computer scientists, and lawyers. Good for them. And bad for us. It is a sad reality that in many places in the Muslim world, the madrasas now attract many of the weaker students who could not make it into more competitive schools of higher education. In other places, such as Pakistan, many of these madrasas have become at best institutions of social welfare providing free room and board, and at worst a breeding ground for the most virulent type of fanaticism.

The decline of the traditional Islamic educational system has had another important consequence: many of the leading Muslim intellectuals in the world today have achieved their intellectual and spiritual understanding of Islam largely outside the traditional madrasa curriculum. That is certainly the case for the contributors to this volume. While a few of us (Ebrahim Moosa, Khaled Abou El Fadl, and Farid Esack) have studied in traditional madrasas, all of us have grown in our understanding of Islam through Ph.D. programs in Islamic studies at Western (or Western-style) universities. Without the benefit of a traditional madrasa curriculum, there are surely some limitations to our arguments. No doubt there are many advantages as well, since we have enjoyed the room and latitude to approach old problems from new perspectives. In a real sense, lay Muslim intellectuals and activists are now stepping into the vacuum created by the marginalization of the traditional Islamic madrasas. This is particularly the case given that many of the products of the contemporary madrasa system have failed to address issues of social justice, pluralism, and gender justice.

Yet the same gap that in a sense has created room for us also makes our task much more difficult. So many contemporary conversations about Islam in the crucial realms of law and theology would be laughed out of any medieval madrasa, with the accusations of superficiality and lack of rigor. As Khaled Abou El Fadl has pointed out, this has also resulted in a situation where pseudo-scholars and quasi-muftis now issue “Islamic verdicts” that often follow authoritarian tendencies. Examples could include Osama bin Laden’s *fatwa* calling for the murder of American civilians. All of this makes the task of progressives speaking as contemporary Muslims to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike much more difficult.

PROGRESSIVES SPEAKING AS CONTEMPORARY MUSLIMS

So now we have some notion of what progressives are and are not. But precisely how is their version of talking different from other Muslim discourses? Let me offer a few key features.

Beyond apologetics

Here is a newflash, courtesy of progressive Muslims: God is doing just fine. God doesn’t need any help. God doesn’t need any defenders. It is humanity that needs help, especially the oppressed, the downtrodden, the marginalized, and the all-but-forgotten who desperately need champions and advocates.

I bring this up to underscore that being a progressive Muslim means self-consciously moving beyond apologetic presentations of Islam. Our apologism does God no good, and it solves none of our real problems. And it is no exaggeration to say that the overwhelming majority of writings that

dominate Islamic centers fall into the realm of apologetics. Why do apologetic writings hold such appeal to religious folks, including Muslims?

The past few years have been a challenging time for nearly all people of faith. For Muslims, this has meant an urgent imperative to define what we stand for and, just as importantly, what we reject. For Catholics, it has meant coming to terms with the catastrophic sexual abuses in the Church. For Jews and Hindus, it has meant confronting the brutal violence committed or tolerated by nation-states that claim to represent them. It has been a time of a great deal of vocal but vexing public conversation about all religions, including Islam.

Part of the challenge is to recognize that there are many ways of talking about all religions, including Islam, in the public sphere. Two of them seem to have gained prominence in the post-9/11 world. One level is the normative, theological way, when self-designated (or selected) representatives speak with the weight of authority, and feel perfectly entitled to make statements like “Catholicism states...,” “Judaism teaches us that...,” and of course, “Islam states...” The other way of talking about religion is more historical and descriptive, less theological, and more people centered. The followers of this perspective are likely to say, “This Jewish group practices the following ritual, while other Jewish groups practice otherwise...”; “These Muslim groups hold this interpretation of *jihad*, while their interpretations are opposed by the following groups...”

I find myself increasingly on the side of the second way of talking. Regarding many issues, the majority of Muslim scholars have formed a clear enough consensus (*ijma'*) to allow us to speak of near unanimity. On other issues – precisely those that many contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims would be interested in hearing about and debating – there has been and remains a wide range of interpretations and practices among Muslim scholars and within Muslim communities. Our task as progressive Muslims is to begin by honestly chronicling the spectrum of Muslim practices and interpretations for both ourselves and society at large. We cannot and should not single out only sublime examples that are likely to be palatable to a non-Muslim public, just as we would not want the xenophobes to focus exclusively on the fanatical fringe of Muslim societies. It is imperative for all of us to demonstrate the full spectrum of interpretations, particularly in dealing with the “difficult” issues (gender constructions, violence, pluralism, etc.).

Furthermore, I find myself being less and less patient and satisfied with assertions that “Islam teaches us...” This seems to me to be an attempt to bypass the role of Muslims in articulating this thing called Islam. Let me be clear, and perhaps controversial here: “Islam” as such teaches us nothing. The Prophet Muhammad does. Interpretive communities do. I would argue that God does, through the text of the Qur'an. But in the case of texts, there are human beings who read them, interpret them, and expound their meanings. Even our encounter with the Prophet is driven by different (and competing) textual

presentations of his life, teachings, and legacy.²⁵ In all cases, the dissemination of Divine teachings is achieved through human agency. Religion is always mediated. To drive this message home, I usually offer this intentionally irreverent comment to my students: “Islam” does not get up in the morning. Islam does not brush its teeth. Islam does not take a shower. Islam eats nothing. And perhaps most importantly for our consideration, Islam *says* nothing. *Muslims* do. Muslims get up in the morning, Muslims brush their teeth, Muslims shower, Muslims eat, and Muslims speak.

Is this just semantics? I do not believe so. My experience, at the level of both devotional and academic communities, has been that many people simply ascribe their own (or their own community’s) interpretations of Islam to “Islam says...” They use such authoritative – and authoritarian – language as a way to close the door on discussion. And closing discussions is something that we cannot afford.²⁶

No more “Pamphlet Islam”

Walk into any Islamic center, and there is likely to be a table in the hallway or in the library that features a wide selection of pamphlets. The pamphlets bear titles like “The Status of Women in Islam,” “Concept of God in Islam,” “Concept of Worship in Islam.” Printed in pale yellow, pink, and green shades, they promise truth in black and white. I hate these pamphlets.

I think we are in imminent danger – if we are not there already – of succumbing to “pamphlet Islam,” the serious intellectual and spiritual fallacy of thinking that complex issues can be handled in four or six glossy pages. They simply cannot. The issues involved are far too complicated, and the human beings who frame the issues are even more so. I recently saw a bumper sticker that proclaimed, “Islam is the answer.” If Islam is the answer, pray tell, what is the question? Modernity? Existence? God?

A few years ago, when I started teaching at an undergraduate college in New York, I was the only Muslim faculty member there. I was predictably appointed as the advisor to the small group of Muslim students on campus. There were about six of them at that time, vastly outnumbered by the other students on campus whom the Muslim students (perhaps rightly) considered to be woefully ignorant of even the basics of Islam. As we went around introducing ourselves, one of the students in the group gushed: “What I love about Islam is that it is so simple!” That comment spurred a great debate, which we are still having four years later. To me, Islam has never been simple. I remember having worked my way through some of the most important Muslim primary sources such as Ghazzali’s *Ihya’* and Rumi’s *Masnavi*, as well as the masterpieces of scholarship on Islam like Marshall Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam* and Harry Wolfson’s *The Philosophy of Kalam*. “Simple” is not exactly a word that comes to mind in describing any of them.

“Islam is simple” is a slogan used all too often as an excuse to avoid discussion, disputation, and even disagreement. After all, if Islam is simple, how can reasonable and intelligent people disagree over it? Do these disagreements occur because some are deluded away from the simple truth? Not so! Islam is not simple because Muslims are not simple. Surely our identities in these virulent and turbulent post-colonial times are far from simple. Muslims are every bit – not an ounce more, and not an ounce less – as complicated as all of the other members of humanity. We argue, we discuss, we disagree, we joke, we laugh, we walk away mad, we come back, we compromise. But we do not, have not ever, and will not ever all agree on one interpretation of Islam.

This is why I so dislike “pamphlet Islam” – and what seems to be taking its place now, “web Islam.”²⁷ I do not want to hear about Islam from an authoritarian who hides his or her own views under a grand title like “The Islamic Position on Jesus.” I would prefer each author to tell me about her or his own position, identify his or her own argument and sources, and mention where they fit in a wider intellectual spectrum. When I mentioned this to some intellectual friends, they replied, “You have become too corrupted by post-modern thinking. That type of self-positioning only comes up in late modernity.” Is that so? I do not dispute that many schools of anthropology, post-colonial theory, and feminist hermeneutics have advocated such self-positioning. Indeed, many of us progressive Muslims have benefited from the fruits of those disciplines. But this self-positioning also seems to me to be one of the characteristic markers of the writings of many, though not all, pre-modern Muslim scholars like the famed Ghazzali.

We can do better than “pamphlet Islam.” We must. From time to time, of course, there is a need for concise articulation of Islam for ourselves and others. But let us do it honestly, without burying the dazzling array of interpretations that have always existed in Muslim thought and life.

Let me demonstrate how urgent a non-apologetic, progressive presentation of Islam can be by tackling two of the most pressing issues that have dominated the public discourse on religions in general and Islam in particular: the need for tolerance, and the positing of Islam as a religion of peace.

Islam beyond “tolerance”

Since September 11, 2001, we have been told time and again that our task as global citizens is to increase tolerance towards one another and to achieve a more tolerant society. Many Muslims have also emphasized that there are great strands of tolerance in Islam that must be articulated more clearly.

I beg to differ. I am not interested in teaching or preaching “tolerance.” Naturally I don’t want to see us kill and oppress each other. But words are powerful vehicles in shaping our thoughts, and there are often many layers of meaning embedded in words. The connotations of “tolerance” are deeply

problematic. Allow me to elaborate this point: the root of the term “tolerance” comes from medieval toxicology and pharmacology, marking how much poison a body could “tolerate” before it would succumb to death. Is this the best that we can do? Is our task to figure out how many “others” (be they Muslims, Jews, blacks, Hindus, homosexuals, non-English speakers, Asians, etc.) we can *tolerate* before it really kills us? Is this the most sublime height of pluralism that we can aspire to? I don’t want to “tolerate” my fellow human beings, but rather to engage them at the deepest level of what makes us human, through both our phenomenal commonality and our dazzling cultural differences. If we are to have any hope of achieving anything resembling a just peace in the future, that examination needs to include both the greatest accomplishments of all civilizations, and also a painful scrutiny of ways in which the place of privilege has come at a great cost to others. That goes equally for both the Islamic civilization and for the Western powers of today.

In short, progressive Muslims do not wish for a “tolerant” Islam, any more than we long for a “tolerant” American or European society. Rather, we seek to bring about a pluralistic society in which we honor and engage each other through our differences and our commonalities.

Islam beyond “religion of peace”

After September 11, 2001, almost every Muslim I know, including myself on a number of occasions, found himself or herself repeating something akin to this phrase: “Islam is a religion of peace. The actions of these terrorists do not represent real Islam.” And yet for some reason, I – speaking not on behalf of any other progressive Muslims, just myself – am less and less satisfied with this mantra.

Let me be clear here: at a fundamental level, I believe that the Islamic tradition offers a path to peace, both in the heart of the individual and in the world at large, when the Islamic imperatives for social justice are followed. Yet there is something pathetically apologetic about turning the phrase “Islam is a religion of peace” into a mantra. It is bad enough to hear Muslim spokespersons repeat it so often while lacking the courage to face the forces of extremism in our own midst. It is just as bad to hear a United States President reassure us that he respects Islam as a “religion of peace” as he prepares to bomb Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq, or support the brutal oppression of Palestinians. In both of the above senses, “Islam is a religion of peace” has become to my ears a hollow phrase, full of apologism and hypocrisy.

As Muslims, we owe it to ourselves to come to terms with the problems inside our own communities. All societies have their beautiful and noble citizens, along with their share of hateful and extremist ones. Muslims are human, not an ounce less and not an ounce more than any other people. We too have our saints and sinners, our fanatical zealots and compassionate exemplars. At this stage of history our primary responsibility is to come to terms with the

oppressive tyrants and fanatics inside our own communities, our own families, and our own hearts. Hiding behind the simple assertion that “Islam is a religion of peace” does not solve our problems.

There is another reason that I have come to detest this slogan. It seems to me that we have lost sight of the real meaning of “peace,” just as we have lost a real sense of “war.” Many have come to think of peace as simply the absence of war, or at least the absence of violent conflict. Yet, as progressives, we must preserve the possibility of upholding resistance to well-entrenched systems of inequality and injustice through non-violent conflict. This is one of the great challenges of our time: affirming the right of a people who have been dehumanized and oppressed to resist, while encouraging them to do so non-violently. This is a great challenge indeed.

The very concept of “peace” can be and has been co-opted and adopted by hegemonic powers to preserve the unjust *status quo*, as we have seen in both Israel and apartheid-era South Africa. At times like this, a progressive can and perhaps must reject the superficial appeals of an unjust peace, and insist instead on a peace that is rooted in justice. This is precisely the sentiment echoed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, he stated, “Peace, in the sense of the absence of war, is of little value to someone who is dying of hunger or cold . . . Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free.”²⁸ Similarly, Bob Marley’s former partner in reggae, Peter Tosh, sang, “We don’t want no peace – we want equal rights and justice!” Marley himself sang a powerful song called “War,” which captures this sense well. In the lyrics below, “war” is seen as more than a violent military conflict. It is, rather, a declaration that one will fight systems of prejudice, injustice, and inequality.

*Until the philosophy which holds one race superior
and another inferior
is finally and permanently
discredited and abandoned –
Everywhere is war –
Me say war.*

*That until there is no longer
first class and second class citizens of any nation
until the colour of a man’s skin
is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes –
Me say war.*

*That until the basic human rights
are equally guaranteed to all,
without regard to race –
Dis a war.*

*That until that day
the dream of lasting peace,
world citizenship
rule of international morality
will remain in but a fleeting illusion
to be pursued, but never attained –
Now everywhere is war – war.*²⁹

The statement that “Islam is a religion of peace” must not be allowed to become a license to avoid dealing with the grinding realities of social, political, and spiritual injustice on the ground level. To do so is to sell out our humanity, and to abandon our cosmic duty to embody the Qur’anic call for implementing justice (*‘adl*) and realizing goodness-and-beauty (*ihsan*). Our great challenge as progressive Muslims is to find a non-violent means of resisting the powers that be, and to speak truth to them. At the same time, we must aim to bring about a just and pluralistic society in which all of us can live and breathe, and realize the God-given dignity to which we are entitled as human beings. We do not *grant* this dignity to one another: it belongs to all of us simply because, as the Qur’an teaches us, all of us have the Divine spirit breathed into us.

CONCLUSION

It is superficial to talk about a conclusion to the progressive Muslim project, since it is clearly only at its beginning. Yet let me offer a final thought here: in the visionary song that frames this essay, Bob Dylan talks about how the “waters around you have grown.” The Qur’an likewise talks about a prophet, Noah, who found his community surrounded by rapidly rising waters. Like Noah, we must accept that we will soon be drenched to the bone. And like Noah, we repeat the prayer:

*wa qul rabbi: anzilni munzalan mubarakan,
wa anta khayru ‘l-munzilin*
And say: “O My Lord, lead me to a blessed landing,
for you are best of deliverers.”³⁰

Let us remember that Noah’s task did not end when he got on the ark, but continued after he landed on the ground. We ask God to lead us to a blessed landing station, one from which our work will continue. The road *there* starts here, at this very moment, with every one of us.

May we all have the courage, the vision, and the compassion to heal this fractured world.³¹

Wa ilayhi raji’un
“And we are perpetually returning to God”

ENDNOTES

*I am deeply grateful to all the friends who have looked over this essay in its various incarnations, and provided me with invaluable suggestions for refining it. Rob Rozehnal took time out of a very busy phase of his life to unselfishly provide me with not one but two sets of comments. Kecia Ali, Scott Kugle, Tara van Brederode, and Tazim Kassam all provided very insightful feedback. Nasrollah Pourjavady graciously pointed out the quotes from Rumi's *Masnavi* and Hazrat 'Ali. Their friendship and kindness is a constant reminder of the fact that none of us walks alone on this path.

1. Lyrics are from Bob Dylan's official web site, <http://www.bobdylan.com/>. This song appeared in Dylan's 1964 album, also titled *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. That version is classic, revolutionary, and powerful. Also worth listening to is the more tender live version on Dylan's *The Bootleg Series, Vols. 1–3* (released 1991). In the second version Dylan sings, "If your spirit to you is worth savin'..."
2. I am here indebted to miriam cooke's discussion of "multiple critique" in her insightful work *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Sa'diyya Shaikh's essay in this volume also brings up this concept, and I am grateful to both of them.
3. Wahhabism is a reactionary theological movement that originated in eighteenth-century Arabia. It remained an undistinguished intellectual movement for a long time, until it was adapted as the ideology of the ruling Sa'ud family, who came upon the incredible wealth of oil resources. Subsequently, this previously trivial ideology was armed with the financial resources to export its vision all over the Muslim world. The essay by Khaled Abou El Fadl in this collection is very useful in demonstrating the ways in which Wahhabism and Salafi reformist movements have not always been in agreement, although many tend to conflate the two today. For more information on Wahhabism, refer to Ahmad Dallal, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750–1850," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (3), 1993, 341–59; Michael Cook, "On the Origins of Wahhabism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3(2), 1992, 191–202; and Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (Oneonta: Islamic Publications International, 2002).
4. "North" and "South" evoke the language of those who point out the hypocrisy and injustice of the global inequalities in the distribution of resources and consumption. The "North" represents those who consume more than their fair share, at the expense of the "South." Many have favored using this terminology in place of the explicitly hierarchical language of "First World" and "Third World" (as if there is more than one world), or other euphemisms like "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries (as if "development" is unequivocal, or quintessentially positive).
5. As the Qur'an states in two separate passages, *wa nafakhtu fihi min ruhi*. God states, "I breathed into humanity something of My own spirit." (Qur'an 15:29 and 38:72)
6. Post-modern critiques of modernity were developed in a whole range of academic disciplines, including feminist scholarship, anthropology, literary criticism, and post-colonial studies. The corpus of post-modern scholarship is truly vast, and often bewildering. A good starting point is the collection of essays by Habermas, Lyotard, Jameson, Eco, Rorty, and others in Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1992). Also useful is Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
7. Shalu Bhalla, *Quotes of Gandhi* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1995), 143.
8. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, released by the White House of George W. Bush in September 2002. Available on-line at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>.
9. I have deliberately avoided the term "fundamentalist," since that term is open to so many interpretations and abuses. The groups that I address here combine a literal reading of

select texts with an exclusivist understanding to arrive at what in any other time in Islamic history would be seen as an extreme position on the spectrum of Islamic interpretations. Yet, contrary to what is often stated, their response is also a distinctly modern one, in the sense that it requires modernity as a foil against which it articulates itself. It is not, as its advocates might claim, simply “traditional,” or “the way things have always been.” Living as we do in these terrible days of Islam-phobia, it is important to point out that just as is the case in the Christian and Jewish traditions, one can be a literalist-exclusivist without necessarily resorting to violence. To put it in a shorthand fashion, not every Wahhabi (or Jama’at Islami) is a terrorist. However, the communal enforcement of literalist-exclusivist ideologies such as Wahhabism so dehumanize entire groups both inside and outside the Muslim community that they narrow the gap to violence against both other Muslims and non-Muslims. So many places in the Muslim world where violence is a fact of life also feature these literalist-exclusivist interpretations of Islam.

10. For insightful reflections on tradition and modernity as related epistemic fields rather than binary oppositions, see Marilyn Robinson Waldman, “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples,” *History of Religions* 25, 1986, 318–40; Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
11. Rabbi Zalman Schachter, cited in Roger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 43. I am deeply grateful to Reb Zalman for reminding me in a conversation that as one commits to undertaking the transformation and reformation of the social and spiritual order, it is also necessary to mourn the injustices that we have willingly and unwillingly participated in. Failure to do so always runs the risk of reformers getting caught in arrogance and self-righteousness.
12. In Arabic, as in other Semitic languages, most nouns are based on a triliteral root system which is then applied to different forms to yield slightly different shades of meaning. Both *jihad* and *ijihad* come from the triliteral root *ja-ha-da*.
13. *Quotes of Gandhi*, 99.
14. It is significant that in this Mu’tazili interpretation, ‘*adl* did not stand for an abstract principle of justice, but rather was seen as being directly related to human free will. If human beings were not free to choose between good and evil, then God would be unjust in punishing us for actions that we are not ultimately responsible for. See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 231.
15. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986; reprint, 1991), 633.
16. The Qur’an uses the phrase *bani adam*, literally “children of Adam,” on at least seven separate occasions to refer to the totality of humanity: 7:26, 7:27, 7:31, 7:35, 7:172, 17:70, and 36:60. “Thus we have honored the children of Adam. . .”
17. *The Rose Garden*. Shaykh Muslih al-Din Sa’di, *Gulistan*, ed. Muhammad Khaza’ili (Tehran: Intisharat-i Javidan, 1361/1982), 190. Translation is mine.
18. Mawlana Jalal al-Din Balkhi Rumi, *Masnavi-yi Ma’navi*, ed. R.A. Nicholson (Tehran: Intisharat-i Nigah, 1371/1992), 532. This line is found in the third book of the Masnavi, line 4726 of the Nicholson Persian edition.
19. *Quotes of Gandhi*, 25.
20. Translation is from R. Walzer, “Islamic Philosophy,” cited in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, NY: Caravan, 1964), 11. This same sentiment is echoed by many other Muslim philosophers.
21. Only half jokingly, I like to refer to these last two figures as “the two holy Bobs.”
22. Abdullahi A. an-Na’im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).
23. Robin Wright, “An Iranian Luther Shakes the Foundations of Islam,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 1995 (quoted from the *Los Angeles Times*, January 1995). Available online through Soroush’s own website: <http://www.seraj.org/guard.htm>.

24. There were of course some exceptions, and there are records of women teachers and students at madrasas who were usually still required to teach from behind a screen to an audience of male pupils.
25. I am here referring to the different corpus of *hadith* collections that contain the statements of the Prophet Muhammad.
26. Among contemporary Muslim authors, one of the most eloquent critics of authoritarian tendencies has been Khaled Abou El Fadl, particularly in his *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001) as well as his *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001).
27. To be fair, one has to admit that the very nature of the web does allow for greater flexibility of scholarly and activist presentations of Islam than in the realm of pamphlets, which tend to be dominated by neo-Wahhabi interpretations. Despite what has been called the "digital divide," there are great opportunities for Muslim communities and individuals to place their views on the web, even if they do not have access to costly printing and distribution resources. Today we find Muslim websites devoted not just to literalist interpretations of Islam, but also to women's groups, social justice organizations, peace movements, gay and lesbian Muslim groups, and Sufi communities.
28. The Dalai Lama, *A Policy of Kindness*, ed. Sidney Piburn (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1990), 17.
29. Bob Marley, "War." Lyrics are from Bob Marley's official website, <http://www.bobmarley.com/>. The words to Marley's song are actually from a speech made by Haile Selassie to the United Nations. The song is featured on the third disk of the four-CD compilation of Marley's songs, entitled *Bob Marley: Songs of Freedom*.
30. Qur'an 23:29
31. I am here reminded of the similarity of this Islamic perspective to the Jewish mystical concept of *Tikkun olam*, which calls humanity to be responsible for healing the world through concrete acts of righteousness and goodness, alongside mystical meditation on the Divine spheres. May this be one bridge that we can use to bring like-minded and like-hearted Muslims and Jews together to heal our communities, as we seek to heal this world. *Amin...*

progressive muslims

ON JUSTICE, GENDER AND PLURALISM

EDITED BY
OMID SAFI



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O X F O R D

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