

PROGRESSIVE ISLAM – A ROSE BY ANY NAME? AMERICAN SOFT POWER IN THE WAR FOR THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF MUSLIMS

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Abstract: The aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States brought into sharp relief the leading role of that country in shaping contemporary Muslim discourses to create discursive urgencies that meet its ideological needs. Reflections on a short but very intense battle for the term “Progressive Islam” between a small group of international activists in the Network of Progressive Muslims (NPM), on one hand, and the US organization, Progressive Muslims of North America (PMUNA), on the other, is one manifestation of how this battle for the hearts and minds of Muslims as part of a larger ideological contestation has played out. This article examines the rupture between the two claimants to the term “Progressive Islam” within the context of (a) the varying historical usages of the term, (b) the need for Muslims to be dealing with intra-religious matters, and (c) the instrumentalization of such reform by the US-led empire as part of an uncritical liberal Muslim response that views Traditional and Fundamentalist expressions of Islam as their primary contradiction rather than Global North-driven imperialism and neo-colonial hegemony. The article argues that in the case of the United States, while recognizing the historicity of all expressions of religions, the projecting of rethinking and reconstructing religious tradition should not be undertaken as an extension of an externally driven “religion-building project” but instead by believers who both own Islam and share their own complicity as citizens of the empire.

Keywords: Islamic liberation theology, Progressive Muslims, Progressive Islam, American Islam, critical Muslim, decoloniality, US empire, Liberal Islam, Moderate Muslims

There are three main components of the war of terrorism; one is hunting down the terrorists, and it involves law enforcement, intelligence sharing, and crackdowns on the sources of funding. It also means confronting states that sponsor terrorism. The second component is homeland security. And the third one is the battle of ideas, which is in the first instance a civil war within the Muslim world between moderates and extremists. (US Government Agent speaking at a conference on Sufism. Nixon Center Report)

Brother, if only we American Muslims can unite and get our act together, then we can provide guidance and leadership to the entire Muslim ummah. (An African American Muslim woman speaking to me a few days after the attack on New York and the Pentagon in 2001)

Introduction

The attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 (hereinafter “9/11”) did not only center Islam in the Western imagination but also transported it to the urban centers of power in the West. By changing the spatial dimensions of the narrative, 9/11 brought this “volatile” and “militant” entity (Islam) irrevocably into the Western world. The power wielded by the Western media, military, and academy in the post-9/11 War on Terror era, particularly in the United States, not only meant increased attention to Islam and greater visibility to Muslims but also hitherto unprecedented opportunities to reshape the contours of the Islamic faith globally. Of course, it goes without saying that understandings of faith and religion are continuously being reformulated – this is the case with anything connected to humans as historical beings. The same applies to the need for such changes, according to our ever-increasing awareness of the perpetual transmutations and varying guises of injustice. Historically, politically and prophetically speaking, the question thus is not simply “to change or not?” but in response to which specific impulses and pressures; that is, how to change from the impulses of the margins and undersides of society – whether they be class, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and so on – in response to the pressures of the powerful.¹

In the United States, the aftermath of 9/11 presented an opportunity for the country and its allies to re-form Islam by instrumentalizing the entirely legitimate grievances among many Muslims and/or others living in majority Muslim states, including the social oppression suffered by Dalit Muslims in India, Ahmadi Muslims and Punjabi (read “darker skinned”) Christians in Pakistan, gender-based violence, and discrimination against Muslim lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons. While many Muslim activists and academics were already working in these areas, this article reflects the unmooring of these issues from their earlier intra-Muslim basis to their reframing and reprioritization as a response to the post-9/11 urgencies and demands of the US empire.

Wittgenstein speaks about language being a “labyrinth of paths; you approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about” (2001: 2). In working on this article, I became aware of how the same may apply to a single word. Coming from

the position of a defeated combatant in the battle for a particular expression – “Progressive Islam” – I am tempted to speak only from a position of woundedness; yet, I also make claims to some scholarship which does impose the burden of fairness and some degree of scholarly distance. I am, furthermore, mindful of Wood’s advice that a frontal attack on a troublesome word may be a less effective means of disenchantment than a patient exposition of its versatility (1975: 85).

While the terms “Progressive Islam” and “Progressive Muslim” have a long and vast genealogy across the Muslim world, this article locates the battle in North America – largely the United States – over the use and definition of the term “Progressive Muslim” or “Progressive Islam” in the aftermath of 9/11 as a microcosm of the soft war being waged by US-led imperialism for the minds and hearts of Muslims. I am conscious that by detailing a contestation largely based in the United States as constituting a particular trend in contemporary Islam, I may be contributing to a growing pattern of that country being viewed as the *qiblah* of Islam today. Nevertheless, drawing attention to the power of, say, toxic masculinity, may also make some contribution – however limited – to arresting its march.

Furthermore, I continue to be associated with the term and am invoked as an example of a “Progressive Muslim” (Safi 2007: xxiv; Johnston 2013; Duderija 2017: 88–90). Based on what I regard as the successful violence inflicted on the term by the post-9/11 shift in its meaning, I feel the need to be explicit about my own position and departure from this term. While I have extensively utilized scholarly and popular material on the subject of “Progressive Islam,” I have also resorted to personal records and memory in producing this article.²

My main focus here is to provide a broad overview of the use of the terms “Progressive Islam” and “Progressive Muslim.” I trace my own encounter with the term, mindful of its earlier genealogy in countries like Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Egypt, before its reemergence in the seventies in Iran and much later in the United States where, I argue, it acquired a distinct flavor of irenic co-existence with US-led imperialism and capitalism. I argue that during this post-9/11 period there arose a contestation between two elements within the North American “Progressive Islam” movement: (a) those who view Muslims – particularly those who refuse to succumb to US attempts to discipline them into becoming servile, “modern,” and uncritical subjects – as the fundamental problem to be addressed and who consider the traditional religious authorities as the single most important obstacles to overcome, and (b) those who view “Progressive Islam” as an appreciation of the faith and who regard the hegemonic project of imperialism, in relation to the world in general and particularly to Muslims, as their primary task and, secondarily, the internal problems of injustice and reform inside the Muslim world.

After providing an overview of the genealogy of the terms “Progressive Islam” and “Progressive Muslim,” I discuss their use by the Network of Progressive Muslims (NPM), a small international collective. The encounter of NPM with another group of North American Muslims who also identify with the term and the rupture between these two groups are discussed with a particular emphasis on the liberal dilution and appropriation of the term as was reflected in the choice of an Advisory Board for the second group in the context of what I consider a larger battle to reshape the contours of contemporary Islam to ensure more pliant Muslim subjects for the larger Global North’s ideological agenda.

Historical Overview of the Use of “Progressive Islam” and “Progressive Muslim”

In some ways, all attempts at definitions are authoritarian. Like any social movement, “Progressive Islam” has a contingent nature and is invariably interpreted in a variety of different ways. While there is – or ought to be – a dynamism with any phenomenon described as “progressive,” there are certain parameters beyond which one cannot stretch the application of a term and still make any claims to its coherence. As Terry Eagleton (1996: 103) points out, “any term which tries to cover everything would end up meaning nothing in particular, since signs work by virtue of their differences.” I argue that in the wake of 9/11, the term “progressive” was consciously shifted beyond what I and many others had recognized, promoted, and identified with, to the point where we no longer desire any association with it.

In the larger Muslim world, the terms “Progressive Islam” or “Progressive Muslim”³ have been commonly used to denote Muslim reformist attempts that deal with the cultural and scientific challenges presented by the encounter with Western modernity as well as internal socio-economic stagnation. These earlier Muslim reform movements and reformist individuals – both in response to what was pejoratively regarded as Muslims’ “religious excesses” via socio-cultural practices incorporated from the encounter with indigenous cultures (*bid’at*), as well as those dealing with the relatively new ideas accompanying modernity and colonialism, such as a more significant social role for women, the need to embrace scientific knowledge, economic growth as the sole index of measuring human progress, and so on – have been extensively dealt with (see Haddad 1982; Siddiqi 1982; Kurzman 1988; Sajoo 2009). In many ways, the push from the later impulse – modernity – has been every bit as ideologically and militarily driven as the post-9/11 postmodern battle for the souls of Muslims.⁴

In considering the relevant twentieth-century usage of the expression, we encounter the problems of local variants of the term or what one imagines the term to encompass even when the term itself was not used. In Egypt, for example,

there was extensive use of the term *Islam al-Yasar* (lit. Leftist Islam), which may capture the problem of economic exploitation covered by the term “Progressive Islam” but excludes the problem of gender injustice (Duderija 2017: 91). Similarly, while Abdolkarim Soroush (1945), the Iranian scholar, is usually counted as a “Progressive Muslim,” he holds rather conservative views on the position of women in Islam (Ziba Husseini 2006).⁵ Many use the term synonymously with liberal Islam and in Muslim societies such as Malaysia and Indonesia, which are currently plagued by relatively new waves of Wahhabism.⁶ The descriptions of a liberal, moderate, or progressive Islam are understandably attractive categories to affirm its own more inherent pluralism and intra tolerance against the new imported rigidities (Van Bruinessen 2009: 187–207; Noor 2009: 208–26).⁷ In these societies, far from being viewed as an American or Global North-constructed or supported project, “Progressive Islam” is viewed as a local response to a relatively alien and growing Wahhabism being artificially grafted on to those historically pluralist societies.⁸

There are vastly different trajectories of the genealogical history of the use of the term “Progressive Islam.” British-born Indian Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872–1953), the English translator and commentator of the Qur’an and an ardent supporter of British imperialism, ran a series of booklets from 1929 to 1941 titled *The Progressive Islam Pamphlet*. Shukri Hanioglu (1995: 202) has detailed the efforts of early twentieth-century Young Turks who wanted to replace the Ottoman Empire’s monarchy with a constitutional democracy to “create a very liberal and progressive Islam” when they attempted to convince their readership that Islam was a kind of materialism, drawing parallels between Islamic thinkers of earlier times and modern materialists. Hanioglu (1995) suggests this was “far more than a device for countering accusations of atheism, which many participants of the movement believed it to be, rather it was the creation of a brand-new ideology presented as Islam.” In the Malay world, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007) founded the journal *Progressive Islam* which was published for 2 years (1954–1955) as part of an attempt to “formulate a serious view concerning the nature of Islam and its relationship with modern thought” (Abaza 2002: 131). Unlike Yusuf Ali, however, Alatas, while focusing on the fundamental problems of Muslim society, including class and caste privileges, was also deeply aware and critical of “the desultory influences from the West” such as “materialism and positivism,” arguing that social problems were the outcome of economic maladjustment and exploitation (Abaza 2002). In Tunisia, during the 1980s, there was a group who called themselves the “Progressive Islamists” (*al-Islamiyyun al-Taqaaddamiyyun*) (Wolf 2017: 45–8) that published a book by that name (Al-Jourshi 2000). And in Iran, particularly during the 1960s and the 1970s, the term was quite popular in Muslim anti-imperialist circles (Hanafi 2009: 126–7).

By the 1970s though, largely through the spread of the Cold War and the proliferation of Marxist material in many parts of the Global South, including in countries such as Iran, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and South Africa, the term “progressive” in political discourse was mainly used in the literature and by movements which espoused socialist and anti-Western imperialist positions.⁹ During this period, references to the expression “Progressive Islam/Muslim” largely referred to opposition to the political and ideological agenda of the Global North, particularly US-led imperialism, the Zionist occupation of Palestine and South African Apartheid, as well as to the various ways that local expressions of Islam could be mobilized in resisting these.

Prior to 9/11 – which also coincided with the beginning of an 8-year teaching sojourn for me in the United States – I had self-described as a “Progressive Islamist” as well as a “Muslim Liberation Theologian.” In the South African context, “progressive” signaled a socio-economic left ideological position with socialist connotations.¹⁰ From a casual perusal, and given the current connotations to “Islamist,” the term “Progressive Islamist” may appear to be a contradiction; however, it was widely in vogue in South Africa amongst activists in both the Call of Islam (1984) and the Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1970) during the 1980s.¹¹ It was a neat fit in a South Africa where leftist organizations and trade unions – all self-describing as “progressive” – were flourishing in resisting the renewed attempts of the apartheid regime to co-opt colored and Indian communities into the white racial governing structures to entrench their own oppression of the black majority.

In the late 1990s, while teaching in the United States, I joined a collective known as the NPM. My departure from the term occurred after NPM was defeated in a battle around the employment of the term amongst some US-based Muslim academics and community activists who founded the Progressive Union of North America (PMUNA) in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.¹² While PMUNA’s existence was of rather short duration – only 2 years – the debates generated by it were intense and, for a Muslim organization, achieved unprecedented coverage in the mainstream US print and visual media.¹³ The issues raised around its formation – both from more traditional Muslim quarters and from a progressive-left perspective – remain pertinent, even more so in the face of escalating Islamophobia and the sharpening of imperialist designs on the Muslim world.

The NPM and Its Definition of “Progressive Islam”

The NPM was formed primarily as an e-mail discussion group on 1 January 1999, under the leadership of Pedram Moallemian (1966), a Canadian Iranian, and a group of Toronto-based Muslim leftist activists to discuss Islamic responses to

“Poverty, racism, social injustice, political oppression and discriminations based on gender, age, colour [and] physical ability [. . . , all issues] which cannot be dealt with without addressing the larger questions and their true causes.”¹⁴ The group soon felt the need to include people of different ideas, ethnic backgrounds, economic statuses, and geographical locations but was still led by the core members,¹⁵ who over a period of a few months formulated a declaration defining “Progressive Islam.” The early drafting was undertaken primarily by two South Africans (Na’eem Jeenah and myself) and one Pakistani (Junaid Ahmad), although the rest of the group were active in discussing, amending, and finally adopting it. The emerging declaration was arguably the first serious organizational and international attempt to define “Progressive Islam.” For this group, as was the case of the Call of Islam’s “Abu Dharrian Islam,” it was an approach to Islam that bore a close resemblance to Liberation Theology:

Progressive Islam is that understanding of Islam and its sources which comes from and is shaped within a commitment to transform society from an unjust one where people are mere objects of exploitation by governments, socio-economic institutions and unequal relationships. The new society will be a just one where people are the subjects of history, the shapers of their own destiny in the full awareness that all of humankind is in a state of returning to God and that the universe was created as a sign of God’s presence. (NPM 1999)

On 30 July 2001, the NPM went public with its mailing list and invited other Muslims who shared its declaration to join the group (<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/NPMuslims/info>). Although small, its internet chat group drew around 400 members in the first year and peaked at 1,589 in 2004 – at that time not an inconsequential number – just before it entered into discussions with Ahmed Nassef (1966–), soon to be one of the co-founders and Director of PMUNA.

An earlier attempt to theorize the nascent progressive Islamic movement is contained in a seminal work by Sanjay Bavikatte (2005) entitled “Allah is in the Details: Towards a Theory of Progressive Islam.” He locates Progressive Islam as one of three then recent strains of what he describes as “critical Islam” (Islamism, liberal Islam, and progressive Islam), describing it as

an ideology [that] emerges at the node of this complex matrix of reflexivity, relativization and trans-nationalization. More specifically, Progressive Islam is a process of self-examination that results in attempts at cultural legitimization and assertion within Islam of specific “progressive” ideas. These ideas may be both the result of absorption of elements of other cultures and a resurrection of previously marginalized ideas/fragments of belief within Islam itself.

NPM, however, described itself in the following terms:

We are activists and/or scholars who have been part of the shaping and articulation of a global progressive Islamic discourse for a number of years. Some of us are from North America while others are not. For us, “Progressive Islam” has been about an approach to our faith that is discovered in actual engagement with other Muslims and those who live on the margins of society (e.g., persons living with AIDS, under occupation, dying as the victims of multi-national corporations, under-funded or non-funded Health Programs or genocidal regimes). While we have all been working in our local or national contexts we have connected with each other in person and on the internet for a number of years. Most of us have served or are serving as the administrators of the major international discussion lists of Progressive Muslims. For us Islam is a faith that affirms justice, compassion and diversity. It is, however, also one that challenges both the manifestations of injustice as well as its socio-economic systemic causes. Islam, for us, is a faith that will refuse to exist in partnership or in a relationship of “moderation” with injustice and imperialism (of which the most dangerous contemporary kind is that represented by US expansionism).¹⁶

In an earlier section, I tried to give a context to the emergence of a concept like “Progressive Islam” in South Africa. What happens when such a concept travels from one context to another and intersects with it? While the impetus for an international progressive Islam movement – as I will show below – initially emerged in the North (Canada) through NPM, it fused with and was deeply informed by notions from participants in the South. We eventually envisioned a serious internationalist impulse at work that attempted to view the world not through the prism of a powerful North but, even while geographically from there, reidentifying ourselves as citizens of the Northern empire in solidarity with its victims in the South. The specificity of particular concepts in the Canadian context was weakened and acquired a new meaning now suffused with input from individuals who had no sense of obligation to the Northern empire. The Canadian concept was enhanced to be used in a sharper way than its own original context. At the same time, the traveling of concepts also has the possibility of abuse in a different context. There is one more caveat to the idea of traveling theory proposed by Edward Said (1983: 226–47). The idea that there is no inherent universal meaning to theory and meaning is always situational and context specific. This was shown in the references to the employment of the term in Pakistan, Iran, and Malaysia. My own historical understanding of the concept of “Progressive Islam” is based on a postcolonial critique of the traveling of ideas from the Global South to Global North. The insufficient lack of respect, responsibility, and care for the

concepts developed in the Global South is a problem when thinking about the later avatar of “Progressive Islam” in North America.

Enter Progressive Islam Lite: Progressive Muslims Union of North America

Prior to defining what I call “Progressive Islam Lite,” the immediate context of the post 9/11 War on Terror era must be contextualized. More specifically, the post-9/11 battle to civilize so-called Muslim barbarians was an important stepping stone in the eventual conversion of a radical “Progressive Islam” into a more liberal “Progressive Islam Lite.” While there is a much older idea of Islam and the Muslim being irredeemable enemies of Western civilization, with a newly articulated Judeo-Christian basis, immediately after 9/11, Islamophobes found it more politically expedient to abandon the blanket demonization of Muslims and instead separate the “Good Muslims” from the “Bad Muslims” and speak of an intra-Muslim civil war for the soul of Islam. This feverish and frantic battle and its ideological agenda after 9/11 has been extensively covered by Mahmood Mamdani’s (2004) work *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, which reminds us that George W. Bush was keen to assure American citizens that, in contrast to Bad Muslims, the Good Muslims were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support “us” in a war against “them.” The Washington-based Nixon Center (Baran 2004), in its conference report on *Understanding Sufism and its Potential Role in US Foreign Policy*, referred to the “battle of ideas” taking place between “moderate” and “extremist” Islam and Bernard Lewis (d. 2018) spoke about “civil war” taking place within the religion.¹⁷ Tony Blair offered his wisdom on the battle between “Reactionary Islam” and “Moderate, Mainstream Islam” (Blair 2007) and Edmund P. Giambastiani, then Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that this “is not a clash between civilizations, but within one civilization” (cited in Gilmore 2006).

While the Good Muslim versus Bad Muslim thesis was widely spread, the badness of the Bad Muslim was assumed, not so the goodness of the Good Muslim. The latter was never to be liberated from the obligation to (a) tirelessly prove his or her goodness by interminable denunciations whenever any Bad Muslim struck anywhere in the Western World and (b) to offer ceaseless declarations of loyalty to Western interests and values. In Bush’s own comments, supposedly lauding the Good Muslims, was also a veiled instruction to them to “clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime [. . .] and to undoubtedly support ‘us’ in this war” against the Bad Muslims (Mamdani 2004: 15). US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley added that the US government ought to “encourage Islamic moderates to dispute the distorted vision of Islam advanced by the terrorists”¹⁸. The “real soul of Islam” was now

synonymous with Western values, and in the United States it was not infrequent that one heard the opinion expressed by the new Muslim moderates that, “properly considered,” the message of the Qur’an or the Shari’ah is identical to that of the US constitution (<https://islamfoundingfathers.wordpress.com> and Emerick 2002 79).

Soon after 9/11 and the commencement of the Western-led project of creating Good and Bad Muslims, the term “Progressive Islam” began to acquire a cuddliness about it but without the mundaneness, even tackiness, associated with “Moderate Islam.” “Progressive Islam” today suggests a slightly up-market, somewhat intellectual approach to Islam with an intellectual and politically correct aura. Other than the politics of what constitute “Progressive Islam,” the major focus of this article, early interventions in the debate also dealt with the following issues:

- a. The question of hyphenated identities and whether simply being described as a Muslim was not adequate,¹⁹ given that Islam is supposedly inherently progressive, moderate, traditional, or human rights friendly – generally, whatever the claimant desired it to be.
- b. The significant, persistent, and ongoing interventions from more conservative or traditional Muslims who opposed everything that progressive and liberal Islam seemed to represent, particularly the affirmation of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.²⁰
- c. The participation of non-North Americans in the debate. While only two of the vocal participants in the anti-imperialist side of the debate came from South Africa, Na’eem Jeenah and myself, there was considerable discomfort among the liberals directed at people with a lack of roots in or citizenry loyalties to the United States or to the US-shaped Islam being so central to the debate.²¹

In the United States, the much-publicized formation of the short-lived Progressive Muslims Union of North America (PMUNA) (2004–2006) led to an extensive and bitter debate in American Muslim circles with significant interventions by some “Progressive Muslims” from other parts of the world. This debate threw into sharp relief significant questions of the definition and nature of “Progressive Islam,” the role of US-based Muslims in the shaping and articulation of a progressive Islamic discourse, the internalization of a US-led hegemonic discourse by local Muslims, and the co-optation of “moderate” and “liberal” Muslims in a broader and explicit American policy of religion-building for the Muslim world.

Many Muslims, particularly among the younger generation, have had much difficulty in accepting the traditional strictures of religious life and, indeed, find the major preoccupations and positions of orthodoxy and traditionalism at

variance with their own understandings of a host of issues such as the role of women, religious and cultural diversity, dress codes, and gay rights. “After 9/11, established leaders were reluctant to hear self-critique or analyze our values and positions,” says Shahed Amanullah, editor-in-chief of *altnmuslim.com*. “A lot of Muslims have done some soul-searching, rethinking the violence and the ghettoized mentality. New voices are being articulated, and a lot of people are coming out of the woodwork” (Friedlin 2004: 29). While 9/11 may well have forced these new voices “out of the woodwork,” the pain of many of these marginalized communities and the quest for a more compassionate and just expression of Islam was deep. These bruised communities and individuals hailed from the impoverished black ghettos of the United States, suffering under the yoke of immigrant dominated bourgeois Muslim institutions; to devout Muslim women being consigned to dark basement prayer spaces; to LGBTQ+ individuals being denied the right to just be; to Muslims living with HIV being scorned by their co-religionists; to creative, critical, and deeply spiritual persons suffering in silence because of religious leaders demanding uncritical fealty to a world where, to paraphrase the Bengali philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, the clear stream of reason had lost its tear in the dreary sand of dead habit. “Such ideas [critical approaches to religious tradition, gender equality, gay rights, religious pluralism, etc.] have been percolating in the Muslim community for some time. But the 9/11 attacks were a great accelerator,” notes Sarah Eltantawi (b. 1977), who served as PMUNA’s Communication Director. “After Sept. 11, there was such an imperative to correct misunderstandings and there was such an intense period of self-reflection,” she says, “. . . A fire was burning beneath our feet” (cited in Esienberger 2004).

The crisis of legitimacy that the traditional and more conservative community structures faced with respect to the broader American society as a result of the events of 9/11 spawned and provided the space for several new initiatives, PMUNA being one.²² Most of these initiatives proceeded from the premise that their primary contradiction was with the established Muslim community variously presented as “backward,” “fundamentalist,” and “orthodox.” At the heart of this “backwardness” was the newly discovered *bete noire* of the empire, Wahhabism (Nassef cited in Friedlin 2004: 29)²³ along with the notion that the primary “real Muslim” contradiction is with fundamentalism and orthodoxy,²⁴ and that the concomitant primary Muslim responsibility is to present a “moderate” face of Islam to the world.

For NPM’s leading figures and some of those in the forefront of spearheading the formation of PMUNA, such as Omid Safi (b. 1970) and Eltantawi, these were struggles that had preceded 9/11. For NPM though, the problem was (a) searching for solutions without any critique of the North Americans’ location as privileged citizens of an empire that was aiding and abetting Muslim dictatorships in

perpetuating the very injustices that we were opposing and (b) the inability to recognize how the prioritization of reforming Islam and taking on the Muslim community in the absence of a struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism, were effectively playing into the hegemonizing project of the Global North.

Until about two months before PMUNA was launched on 15 November 2004, the NPM was still broadly supportive of the initiative and handed over access and control over its very substantial membership database to Ahmed Nassef, co-founder with Safi of PMUNA. It was subsequent to this that two NPM members (myself and Na'eem Jeenah) received invitation letters signed by Safi and one Hussain Ibish (1963–) in their capacities as Chairman and Deputy Chairman, respectively, inviting us to serve on the Advisory Board of PMUNA. Neither of us – nor anyone that we knew – were consulted on the composition of the board. The following collection of figures that Safi, Ibish, Nassef, and whomever else they worked with to lead the new organization, was a fuse that blew the gasket of anyone with a principled commitment to Islam and/or to progressive values – even if these were interpreted in the broadest pre-9/11 sense:²⁵

- Khaled Abou El Fadl (1963–), a prominent and senior US-based Egyptian scholar of Islamic, law, theology, and ethics.
- Ali Abunimah (1971–), a major US-based Palestinian activist for Palestinian freedom and founder of the *Electronic Intifada*.
- Leila Ahmed (1940–), a Harvard-based academic of Egyptian descent who focuses on Islam and gender.
- Akbar S. Ahmed (1943–), a former Pakistani civil servant and then Ambassador to the US appointed by General Pervez Musharraf.
- Tariq Ali (1943–), a well-known UK-based leftist activist and author.
- Ziad Asali (1942–), a Palestinian American medical doctor with close ties to various US administrations and who played a leadership role in several Arab-American organizations.
- Shirin Ebadi (1947–), an Iranian lawyer and civil right activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003.
- Farid Esack (1955–) a South African Islamic liberation theologian, then based at Xavier University in Cincinnati, USA.
- Na'eem Jeenah (1965–) a leading South African Muslim community activist and journalist.
- Fatima Fariha al-Jerrahi (1946–), a *Sufi Shaykhah* of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order in New York.
- Mohja Kahf (1967–), a Syrian-American poet novelist, and scholar.
- Rashid Ismail Khalidi (1948–), a Palestinian American historian at Columbia University and editor of the scholarly *Journal of Palestine Studies*.

- Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, a then relatively new American convert to Islam and junior academic who had just written a chapter in *Progressive Muslims* offering an Islamic justification for homosexuality.
- MA Muqtedar Khan (1966–), then a relatively junior scholar of Islam and international relations who hails from India.
- Seeme and Hassan Malik, a wealthy US couple of Pakistani origin who founded Muslims for (George W.) Bush.
- Ebrahim Moosa (1955–), a senior US-based South African scholar of contemporary Islam and a graduate of a major center of traditional Islamic learning, Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow, India.
- Muhammad Warith Deen (1933–2008), the son of the founder of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammed, and one of two claimants to the latter’s heritage. Deen transformed his faction into the Sunni World Community of Al-Islam in the West.
- Tariq Ramadan (1962–), a Swiss-based Islamic public intellectual of Egyptian origin.
- Abdolkarim Soroush (1945–), a prominent Iranian reformist scholar of Islam who since 2002 has been teaching in the United States.
- Amina Wadud (1952–), author of *Qur’an and Woman* and arguably the most famous Muslim feminist scholar activist.
- Fareed Zakaria (1964–), a prominent media figure, political scientist, and author in the United States who comes from India.
- Hussein Ibish (1963–), a Lebanese-American who served as communications director for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

The NPM collective described its astonishment at

the political naivety, stupidity or ignorance of the individuals involved in producing this list – even if one is charitable enough to accommodate the peculiarly US eccentricity of describing the political center as “left,” “democratic” or “progressive,” and the “left” as “dyed in the wool communists.” (Network of Progressive Muslims).

While the nascent organization refused to define “Progressive Islam,” and *ad nauseum* appealed to “broad tentatism,” the composition of the proposed members of the PMUNA Advisory Board, for NPM, told the whole story about the real agenda of PMUNA and open virtual warfare broke out between the two entities with none of them until then having had a single negative personal encounter with anyone on the other side.²⁶

NPM accused PMUNA of imperialist overreach, claiming that “the chutzpah to include non-North American citizens in its membership and on its Advisory Board

was extraordinary, reflecting the US presumption of being the center of the world.” In NPM circles there was a deep sense of betrayal and bitterness, fairly or not, at the impending loss of the term “Progressive Islam.” For NPM, by drafting this extraordinarily incoherent list of invitees to serve on their Advisory Board, the PMUNA leadership were either sleep-walking, ignorant, and/or indifferent to the meanings – in however varied their forms – of both Islam and Progressivism and obsessed with maximum buy-in from as many Muslims as possible who were unhappy with the American Muslim leadership organizations.

Dispensing with Islam – and Fudging Muslimness

The list contained the names of individuals who had quietly walked away from Islam and others, such as Tariq Ali and Hussein Ibish,²⁷ who did so vocally, and yet others, such as Fareed Zakaria,²⁸ who until that time had avoided any public self-reference to a Muslim identity but later disclosed an absence of any faith connections to Islam. In the NPM, we were aware of people identifying as Muslims despite their indifference to Muslim community allegiances or affinity, neglect of or indifference to Muslim religious practices, and even indifference to Muslim religious beliefs. While NPM felt a sense of sadness at the abandonment of Islam and quietly harbored hopes for its return, it did not have any particular antipathy for these individuals. What NPM found inexplicable and bitterly opposed about the PMUNA move was that individuals who had publicly distanced themselves from Islam should demand the right to be called Muslims, and, worse, be invited to serve on the leadership – one, Ibish, as Deputy Chairperson – of an organization that would be leading the Muslim community in rethinking its religious responses to the contemporary challenges facing them. This was not an oversight on PMUNA’s part, for soon after its formation it started advocating the idea of Muslims as a socio-cultural-ethnic community rather than a community connected by shared faith and the ideal of righteous praxis.

Individuals without any affinity with larger Muslim communities nor any faith in Islam, but who merely hail from Muslim lands or who own Muslim names, suggest that Islam is a sub-national, national, or a cross-national identity of groups competing for political or socio-economic resources. Such an Islam is constructed as a manageable set of definitions that can be instrumentally deployed as an ideology. Islam as an ideology derives less from the lived experiences of the believers and is preoccupied with molding a highly utilitarian pseudo-religious project. In Islam as an ideology, use value always trumps transcendence. Islam as an ideology and Islam as a faith are not mutually exclusive; they are like two axes on which the state of Islam can be plotted. One way of explaining the difference between the two is, to paraphrase Ashis Nandy, to understand ideology as

something that its believers constantly need to protect and faith as something its believers constantly expect to protect them (Nandy 1998: 322).

This is because faith always includes a theory of transcendence and usually sanctions an experience of transcendence whereas ideology is wary of theories and experiences of transcendence unless they can be used for some utilitarian purpose. The abandoning of a Muslim identity and a simultaneous invoking of it appeared to be rather utilitarian. The redefinition of a Muslim beyond a faith and praxis commitment to the virtuous and humane principles of Islam – or a desire for such a commitment – then becomes an extension of the greater project of empire to force Muslims “re-think” and “re-shape” Islam for its needs. Liberal, “moderate” Muslims depend on the empire to financially and politically support their reformist agenda to civilize their lesser co-religionists, while “Progressive Muslims” rely upon solid activist and leftist intellectuals with Muslim names to be critical of the empire, of the policies of Israel, and so on. Both the “moderate” as well as new “Progressive Muslims” begin with the assumption that positive changes cannot come about from within Muslim communities themselves, but involve a necessary dependence on either the more enlightened empire or the more enlightened “cultural Muslim,” the cultured intellectual who has been educated and is located in the West.

As stated by Safi, one of the goals of PMUNA was “to reform Islam from within” (Beliefnet.com 2004). The fundamental difference between a progressive agenda within Islam and one that sees its purpose in overcoming Islam escaped PMUNA entirely. As one of the critics on the NPM list pointedly asked, “What’s the point in ‘reforming’ something that doesn’t have any substance?” adding that “‘Islam’ as a mere cultural identity is pointless” (Network of Progressive Muslims). The NPM collective argued that the point here was to engage in faith engineering; the empire required not only native informants but also native engineers who, with its financial and media support, could determinedly proceed with the task of policing and civilizing the restless and nonconforming barbarians.

Replacing Progressive with “Progressive Lite”

In a political or ideological context, the term “progressive” has decidedly leftist overtones and is usually juxtaposed with “reactionary,” that is, being wedded to the status quo or to conservative political ideas. In critical discourse the term “progressive” also denotes an affinity with some form of communitarianism as opposed to liberalism which espouses greater individualism. Many leftists use the term exclusively in relation to themselves as an ideological group engaging in a radical critique of society and challenging the structural basis of various injustices, such as class and gender, rather than opting for simple reformism that leaves the structural basis of such injustices intact. The term is also used in opposition to liberalism with

its emphasis on individual liberties within a societal framework in which all have equal opportunity regardless of the starting points of various classes within a society. While liberals would advocate social change, progressives would additionally interrogate the nature of change and ask which socio-economic class stands to benefit most from these changes. Within the broader socio-economic context, liberalism with its commitment to minimalist universal ethics (and minimum state intervention in the market) is often seen as merely a set of ideas advocating greater individual liberties while it is actually inextricably interwoven with the free market ideology.

Ideologically, the list was an incoherent collection of individuals ranging from those with progressive credentials such as Tariq Ali, Ali Abunima, and Na'eem Jeenah to political conservatives and right-wing reactionaries. Indicative of this turn to framing progressive Islam as wholly uncritical of imperialism was the inclusion of the following individuals on this list of invited Founding Board Members:

- Ziad Asali from the pro-Israel Washington-based American Task Force on Palestine. Asali publicly denied the right of return for Palestinian exiles and refugees at a 2002 UN-NGO conference and took pride in attending George W. Bush's *iftar* (fast breaking meal) in 2003, despite appeals from the Muslim community to boycott it.
- Muqtedar Khan, who wrote that "as soon as it became clear that Muslims were behind 9/11, I told my wife 'there goes my chance to be this country's first Muslim Henry Kissinger'" (<http://www.ijtihad.org/AM911.htm>). Referring to the US war on Iraq, he wrote "We will fight with America and we will fight for America. We have a covenant with this nation, we see it as a divine commitment" (<http://www.ijtihad.org/BinladenII.htm>).
- Fareed Zakaria, who wrote in a 5 August 2002 *Newsweek* article titled "Invade Iraq, but bring friends," that: "Done right, an invasion (of Iraq) would be the single best path to reform the Arab world." Zakaria has also opposed anti-apartheid divestment from South Africa (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DBAQuxbXYAAkEus.jpg>).
- Seeme and Malik Hassan, the founders of Muslims for Bush, donated more than a million dollars to the Bush campaign²⁹ and praised Daniel Pipes (<http://muslimsforbush.com/>). Seeme Hassan, in relation to the invasion of Iraq, wrote, "I believe Bush is bringing liberation not war" (Hassan n.d.)

The eclectic collection of names proposed for the Founding Board Members was further proof for the NPM Collective of the shift in the meaning of the term progressive to denote (a) anyone who appeared indifferent or opposed to

traditional Islam or Muslim authority structures even if these individuals were self-proclaimed atheists or right-wing ideologues and (b) a relegation of the Muslim anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist critique to the inconsequential.

The NPM statement of dissent with the founders of PMUNA argues that

For us Islam is a faith that affirms justice, compassion and diversity. It is, however, also one that challenges both the manifestations of injustice as well as its socio-economic systemic causes. Islam, for us, is a faith that will refuse to exist in partnership or in a relationship of “moderation” with injustice and imperialism (of which the most dangerous contemporary kind is that represented by US expansionism). (Network of Progressive Muslims).

The liberatory view of “Progressive Islam” as expounded by the NPM was but one of the casualties of 9/11 when, swallowed by the urgencies of a badly wounded empire, the term became synonymous with a liberal Muslim rejection of Islamic tradition and authority, on one hand, and a desperation to fit into the requirements of the US for a quietist “moderate” Islam, on the other.

NPM’s critique of the formation of PMUNA was a seminal moment in the rupture between liberal “Progressive Islam” and a more radical “Progressive Islam.” While most of the academics associated with the *Progressive Muslims* anthology sat out this debate on the side-lines, it waged ferociously on the internet – primarily through internet discussions on the PMUNAdesbate.org site. Focusing its attack on the ideologically incoherent list of names to head the PMUNA initiative – both on the Executive Committee and the Advisory Board – as emblematic of political and religious incoherence, NPM wrote,

The collection of people invited [to serve on the Advisory Board of PMUNA] from far-right to far-left, from people who have publicly stated that they are not Muslims and others who identify with the Muslim community and Islam, is a strange one [. . .]. This invitation may be understood if we are merely interested in advancing the well-being of some tribal, ethnic or social community, but not if our primary agenda is one of justice. In none of the formations describing themselves as “progressive” – or even “liberal” – In the world would such an array of individuals as Advisors be comprehensible. Furthermore, the notion of being located within a community in order to address its concerns and to participate in mutual transformation is intrinsic to the term “progressive.” Academics, writers or millionaires who have chosen to sit outside cannot legitimately claim a role in the transformation process of a community. Why should Muslims be held to different standards of acceptability by friends and allies from [other] progressive sectors? The logic of holding different criteria of “progressive” for Muslims smacks of racism and is deeply offensive and patronizing.

In the case of any entity that describes itself as “progressive” and as “Muslim” this array and inclusion of individuals who have been unashamed in their embrace of an imperialist agenda reflects an unprincipled utilitarianism where one makes use of anyone or their names who can bring in some money. Alternatively, it reflects a bewildering ideological confusion – something not quite expected of those who are taking it upon themselves to take Muslims in North America on any progressive journey. For progressive Muslims, these people [the proposed Advisors] should be the targets of our activism – people that need to be converted – not embraced as comrades or Advisors. (Network of Progressive Muslims).

While, at a superficial glance, the debate appeared to be about individuals, it went to the heart of contestation as to what and who can be described as a “Progressive Muslim.” Participants lined up on different sides, and personal friends of both sides – academics and activists – watched on in a combination of sadness and bewilderment because many had not thought through the difference between a liberal or modernist theology, on one hand, and a progressive liberation theology, on the other, and they had a deep respect for both main protagonists – Safi and myself. While they respected my scholarly contribution to liberative and contextual qur’anic hermeneutics, they failed to see why I would oppose the development of a contextual approach to Islam in North America. The response was simple, in the words of Itrath Syed, “The PMUNA is a liberal organization, not a progressive one” (Network of Progressive Muslims).

In response to the NPM collective’s accusations of selling out, PMUNA made the argument for

a big tent to embrace Muslims of all shades, leanings and schools of thought when it defined a Muslim as is anyone who identifies herself or himself as “Muslim,” including those whose identification is based on social commitments and cultural heritage. (Ghazali 2004)

Nassef described the objections to these people as

Launching witch hunts against people for not fitting someone’s narrow views [and this] goes against everything we believe as progressives [...] and that fighting this kind of thinking is a big reason we started PMU in the first place. We want to bring people together, not build ideological litmus tests. (“Progressive Muslims Take Heat” 2004)

PMUNA was launched on 15 November 2004 in New York,³⁰ with the stated objective to “provide a forum, voice, and organizing mechanism to North American Muslims who wish to pursue a progressive intellectual, social and political agenda” (PMU Statement of Principles, www.pmuna.org). With its alternative ways of

framing debates within the Muslim community, PMUNA threatened to challenge the supremacy of established organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR), which were largely dismissive of its formation.

PMUNA's widely reported launch took place at the Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York, the citadel of radical Christian theological thinking and an institution where I taught during that fateful autumn semester when the planes struck the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. UTS was a space where a faculty member, at a commemoration service, three hours after the first plane hit the first tower could courageously proclaim: "And let us not ignore the fact that those two towers themselves represent the worst form of terrorism that people in most parts of the world in their millions, die from – capitalism and its partner, economic exploitation."

PMUNA's launch was accompanied by a well-crafted and comprehensive statement, "Why We Are Launching a Progressive Muslim Union" by Eltantawi, Ibish, Nassef, and Safi (<http://www.muslimwakeup.com>). Its foundational statement omitted any reference to the role of the non-North American participants in the debates, stating that "it was the result of almost two years of conversation and collaboration between a group of North American Muslims who are committed to representing and renewing our community in all its social, ideological and political diversity" (Creet 2011: 178). The statement dealt with the need for new platforms for Muslims "committed to progressive social stances" and "in recognition of the urgent need for greater and more coordinated articulation of the pluralistic and compassionate sentiments of vast sections of the community":

PMU seeks to expand the range of spiritual, social, intellectual, and political choices for North American Muslims, and to challenge the narrow set of "normative" Muslim ideas and behavior expected of all of us both within and beyond the North American Muslim community.

We stand for the idea that to be a Muslim is not simply to follow an unquestioned corpus of laws, or to subscribe to a narrow reading of the faith, but rather is an act of self-identification with a great spiritual, philosophical and civilizational tradition. We embrace the simple proposition that you are a Muslim if you say you are a Muslim – for whatever reason or set of reasons – and that no one is entitled to question or undermine this identity.

We embrace the vast diversity of expressions of Islamic devotion as integral to the traditions of the faith, which historically has been among the most pluralistic of the major religions.

A respectful but serious and self-critical interrogation of sources and interpretations within Islamic traditions is a key aspect of our agenda. Pursuing a progressive North American Muslim agenda on many issues, such as gender equality, means examining the ways Islam has functioned as a social text in order to distinguish the universal and egalitarian values of the faith from oppressive or dysfunctional cultural practices with which, both inside and outside of our community, it is all too often confused.

PMU also recognizes that some people identify themselves as Muslims because of social commitments, but whose religious sentiments may be limited. By embracing such people as part of our constituency, PMU is recognizing that a commitment to humanist values does not make anyone less a part of the community or less an heir to the rich legacy of Islamic civilization and cultures.

The aim here is not to create some sort of “new Islam” or “American Islam” [. . .] Rather, we seek to join the work already underway by so many others to bolster the sense of pluralism, commitment to justice, and diversity within Islamic discourses which has been undermined by the spread of literalist and dogmatic interpretations of the faith in recent decades.

PMU will defend civil rights here at home, and human rights abroad. We will not hesitate to critique Muslim societies, including for the deplorable human rights standards in many Middle Eastern states, most often exemplified by the status of women, and for atrocities such as the disaster in Darfur. PMU will also strongly oppose neoconservative and other extremist voices in our own country that urge the United States to act as an imperial predator.

PMU will never turn its back to the long-suffering Palestinian people and rejects completely the idea that a progressive agenda for the Muslim community requires accepting or remaining silent about the abuse of the Palestinians. Rather, we seek to be a partner for all those who seek peace rooted in justice. (Eltantawi et al. 2004)

PMUNA had a tumultuous 2-year existence and disbanded in December 2006 after much acrimonious and public infighting and a series of resignations from its Executive Board Members – including three of the four founding members, Omid Safi, Hussein Ibish, and Sarah Eltantawi in August 2005. Its demise was followed by another initiative, Muslims for Progressive Values in May 2007, led by two of its departing board members, then co-chair, Pamela Taylor, and then executive director, Ani Zonneveld. Both resigned from the PMUNA board, citing irreconcilable conflicts with another board member, Tarek Fatah, the Administrator of PMUNA’s mailing list.³¹

This parting of ways between the liberals who, in the deluge of media coverage, had acquired public control of the term “Progressive Muslims,” and the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist progressives – in what Bavikatte broadly described “the critical Muslim tendency,” was inevitable; 9/11 reflected a tectonic shift in Muslim thinking. The extent and ferocity of the battle for the minds of Muslims, the desperation of many Muslims living in the Global North – or beholden to it – to prove that they are loyal natives to the empire was intense, as was the Western media, echoing George W. Bush’s mantra that Muslims must show that they are either with us or against us. Muslim liberalism, backed by the not inconsequential media and private as well as US governmental financial support, received a significant shot in the arm. The task to civilize the Muslim barbarians was in full swing – not only in the United States but globally.

One key difference between the radical progressive Islam approach of the NPM and the liberal approach of PMUNA’s “Progressive Islam Lite” is the primacy of the political. Decolonial Muslim theorist S. Sayyid argues from a postfoundationalist philosophical position (Marchart 2007) that counter-hegemonic critical Muslim projects must center the political, which is closely tied with the ontological and not politics/ontic (Sayyid 2014: 148). The centering of the political/ontological over that of the politics/ontic means that what is primal in a radical approach is first defining what the political social order is ontologically – that is, how it is defined *a priori* – and how to change the social order from this vantage point. This is in contradistinction to a more liberal *ontic* approach, which accepts social order as a given and attempts to alter it through changing the (ontic) politics of a much wider political ontology (Marchart 2007: 1–8). For Sayyid, defining social difference is key, with the primary social ontological difference under the conditions of coloniality being that of the West over the Rest, and more specifically in relation to Muslims, the West over Islam (Sayyid 1997). This means that a critique of the West must be primal as it is the political organizing principle which already predefines any Muslim attempt at reform. In overlooking the primacy of the political ontological difference that Western supremacy creates, liberal progressive reformists like PMUNA can only deal with the politics of Muslim reform that does not attempt a radical questioning of the social order from a counter-hegemonic positionality.

After 9/11, both traditional Islam and Islamism were on the back foot – at least politically – while some quietist Sufis and liberal proponents of Islam were now on the march led by Muslim academics with the active support of their non-Muslim colleagues, many of whom had until then been known to have confined their work to supposedly apolitical serious scholarship, non-Muslim think-tanks and by governments – Muslim and otherwise.

While warmly acknowledging that “there are those who truly deserve the label of ‘progressive’ Muslims, as they live up to the standards of openness, tolerance

and universal humanism as found in Islam,” Farish Noor, a Malaysian scholar, pointed to a challenge that was looming large on the horizon – if, indeed, the storm of accommodationist Islam had not already broken by then:

But the danger we face today is that there is the “good” version of Islam being promoted by Washington and the powers that be in the West. This is the genetically-modified version of Islam that is toothless, spineless and gutless and can only parrot the litany of the West uncritically. For such Muslims, critical engagement with the West effectively means doing whatever their Western paymasters pay and tell them to do. By doing so they have not only discredited themselves, but also the agenda and project of progressive Islam itself. (Noor n.d.)

Conclusion

In some ways, this subsuming of the term “progressive” by liberalism has also signified the triumph of the soft power of the United States over other more local forces – including indigenous forms of liberative Islamic praxis. This is arguably the only country in the world where a local newspaper, *The New York Times*, can regularly write editorials dispensing advice and warnings to every other nation. I am mindful that only those with soft power read the *New York Times*; the ones with real power read the *Wall Street Journal*. In many ways, US-based scholars of Islam function under the illusions that they wield power while operating within the context of and often in the service of real power – capitalist and the military industrial complex. From Washington DC and New York, nations are destroyed and rebuilt and extensive policy documents are produced about “religion-building,” that is, how to eliminate some tendencies in a religion one day and promote another the next in one area of the world while doing the reverse in another (“democracy” for Iran because the current rulers do not like us and a totalitarian monarchy for Saudi Arabia because their rulers do). Wahhabism is acceptable for Saudi Arabia and Qatar because they are our friends but its nemesis, Sufism, must be cultivated in the United States itself and abroad because it is a good antidote to militant Wahhabism; *jihad-i-akbar* was a requirement for the Afghan people when they fought the Soviet invasion and *jihad-i-asghar* when they fought the US invasion. The believers are, of course, absent in all this policy formulation – except as chattel to be bartered to the highest bidder.

Muslims are not sanitized entities in the United States and it is easy to see how persons who have grown up there begin to internalize a hegemonic discourse and start thinking of themselves as the axis around which the earth rotates. Many Muslim liberals view specific acts of the US empire – such as constant military

and material support for Israel, voting for a Republican as president, or invading another country as objectionable or protest-able – while remaining indifferent to or oblivious of the country's capitalist, colonialist, and slave-holding foundation as problematic in and of itself. In this inability or refusal to make connections between the historical colonial and ongoing plundering relationship via economic systems and the military industrial complex, which requires ongoing wars, their loyalty to the myth of the United States as a civilizing force is laid bare. That the country has offered a refuge to some persons from Muslim countries is not problematic by itself. A Muslim by conviction would, however, not seek to evade the question about who pays the price for the refuge and privilege afforded to him or her as a citizen of empire. Like whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, and wealth, a denial of one's one location, or ignorance of it, is tantamount to complicity. The offer of refuge is entirely unrelated to Islam, freedom, justice, and democracy. All these are buzzwords to advance its own hegemony and the liberal or progressive Muslims – whatever positive role he or she may play in the lives of deeply conflicted Muslims who, in their own communities, suffer gender abuse, homophobia, a denial of bodily autonomy – are also cogs in the ideological apparatus of empire.

There is no religious experience or community that is encountered outside historical contexts, but not all contexts have the just claim to consciously reshape any particular religious tradition. If this were the case then Pharaoh, given his context of power, would have been able to claim a truth of his own divinity as the contextual basis of his "theology." The post-9/11 "Progressive Muslims" were entitled to think about a contextual Islam. While absorbed in what kind of Islam they desired, the question as to what kind of Americans they were and the nature of the country that they were desperate to be comfortable in was eluded. They all moved from the position of proud, grateful, and patriotic Americans and Canadians – not complicit citizens of empire.

Before concluding, I must stress that this article has two major limitations. First, an alternative account of the discursivity of "Progressive Islam" requires further elaboration. However, given the extent of analysis of linguistic and political categories that would have to be undertaken to fully develop this line of thought and the space constraints of a journal article, I have only been able to provide a precursor of this alternative by way of drawing attention to the NPM collective statements. Second, I have not offered a clear program for a positive political project that should emerge on the basis of a critique of the lite versus radical "Progressive Islam." However, this article should be seen as tackling some considerations around the nature (and even ontology) of the discourse, struggle, community and various social actors, and so on, involved in the struggle for "Progressive Islam." It has sought to defend a certain way of doing theory and

understanding problems in contemporary Islamic discourse against the reshaped “Progressive Islam” critiqued. While not overstating my importance as a theorist of “Progressive Islam,” all theorists have very limited advice pertaining to the practicalities of the struggle for a more just world; real political creativity emerges in the *praxis* of the practitioner immersed within his/her context, both through spontaneity – the emergence of the uncanny and the new in the political – and through a revolutionary rather than a scholarly discipline, attesting to their fidelity to their struggles.

Notes

1. In framing the question thus, I am not unaware that the question may also emerge from both sets of impulses, nor that being in the one category of the marginalized does not imply that one may not be among the powerful in one or more category of the other.
2. While I have an extensive personal archive of correspondence relating to this debate, I have only utilized these where the postings were on publicly accessible sites.
3. There is an obvious distinction between these two terms and there has been much debate in the earlier stages of the Progressive Muslims Network as to which one to adopt, finally opting for “Progressive Muslims.” For the purposes of this article, however, the distinction between these two terms, unless evident from the context, is irrelevant.
4. The Muslim reform project’s response to modernity without offering any serious critique of modernity itself remains relatively uncritiqued. The critique that we do have emanates from: scholarly traditionalists, like Yasser Qadi and Jonathan Brown (2016: 100–135); those associated with the Perennialist School, such as Sayyed Hossein Nasr (2011); postcolonial scholarship, such as Saba Mahmood (2006: 323–47); and decolonial scholarship, in its early stages, by the likes of Houria Bouteldja (2016).
5. One of the main protagonists of *Islam al-Yasar* is Hassan Hanafi (1935–), who has in personal conversations with me (frequently) and in a public exchange with Margot Badran (The Formation of Normative Orders in the Islamic World – Goethe University, Frankfurt, 7 to 8 May 2010, Frankfurt am Main) lamented the entry into what he describes as “the obsession with gender issues” in leftist Islamist discourse.
6. Wahhabism is a theology predominant in the Gulf States, with an austere, textual, and conservative approach to Islamic doctrine. It regards local cultural practices which may have fused with Muslim devotional rituals as heretical. Over the last 40 years, since the post-1967 oil boom and escalation in the price of oil, Saudi Arabia has been able to export Wahhabism on an unprecedented scale to other parts of the Muslim world.
7. This partly explains the generally positive attitude toward – even embrace of – the term by scholars deeply critical of neo-colonialism and imperialism such as Sayed Farid Alatas (1961–) in Singapore, Asghar Ali Engineer (1939–2013) in India, and Farish Noor (1967–) and Chandra Muzaffar (1947–) in Malaysia.
8. It should not be ignored that the theo-ideological interventions in these societies are far from one-sided; significant financial aid flows into these countries from Global North governments and supposedly nongovernmental organizations such as the Asia Foundation lend a hand to the growth of liberal Islam.
9. The transformation of the term is also mirrored in non-Muslim discourse where it earlier represented a simple support for improvement of society by reform (*Oxford Dictionary*, s.v.

“Progressive”) and that the ideas of progress in the areas of technology, science, and economic development would necessarily lead to improving the human condition (Nisbet 1980). By the late early nineteenth century it became evident that progress in these areas did not necessarily translate into greater socio-economic equality and that progress in relation to the disparity in income was arrested by the extensive and pervasive economic inequality that emerged from minimally regulated laissez-faire and monopoly capitalism (Nugent 2010: 2). Driven by the same impulses to improve the human condition, socialists and Marxists were now regarded as the progressives.

10. The fourth definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* credits South African English for the more ideological denotation of the word “progressive”: “More recently in South Africa, designating several political parties committed to a policy of nonracialism; also, freq. a name or term adopted by radical, left-wing, or communist parties” (*OED*, s.v. “Progressive”).
11. The simultaneous identification with the Islamic Movement and leftist political ideals may appear to some as schizophrenic. The Islamic movement in South Africa, however, was a complex entity that initially accommodated different approaches to Islam and offered individuals or *halaqat* (study circles) a smorgasbord of readings with some more inclined to Ali Shariati (d. 1977) and Frantz Fanon (d. 1961) and others to Sayyid Qutub (d. 1966) and Abu l-ʿAla Mawdudi (d. 1979). When the tensions were no longer sustainable individuals and groups hived off; some to start more charitable projects such as the Africa Muslim Project and others, new activist organizations such as Qibla and the Call of Islam (Tayob 1985).
12. This debate was largely conducted on social media, particularly e-mail lists and blogs such as, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/NPMuslims/info>; <http://living-tradition.blogspot.com>, muslimwakeup.com and <http://pmunadebate.blogspot.com>, although all of the of the leading participants in it were activists and often personally known to each other.
13. The media coverage, all duly celebrated along with approving readers’ comment on muslimwakeup.co, included the *New York Times*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Financial Times* (London), *Fox News*, and *CNN* (http://www.muslimwakeup.com/blog/archives/mwu_in_the_media/index.php).
14. “About”. (1999). Progressive Muslim Network. 1 January. Available at: progressivemuslims.tripod.com/AboutUs.html. Accessed 22 Nov 2018.
15. This initial core group comprised the following individuals: Junaid Ahmad (Yorktown/Islamabad), Altaf Bhimji (San Francisco), Anna Ghonim (Cairo), Naʿem Jeenah (Johannesburg), Trish Kannous (St Paul, MN), Pedram Moallemian (Toronto), Itrath Syed (Vancouver), and Muhammed Zaki (Jakarta).
16. “Text of a Comment on the Formation of PMUNA”. A Comment on PMUNA. 12 Nov 2004. Available at: commentpmuna.blogspot.com/2004/11/text-of-comment-on-formation-of-pmuna.html. Accessed 22 Nov 2018.
17. While this was the view that Lewis held in public fora, the journalist, Allan Hirsh, reported that Lewis had told him in an interview that he viewed the 9/11 attack as “the opening salvo of the final battle” between Western and Islamic civilizations (Hirsh 2004). This view of Muslims as irredeemable was also much more consistent with Lewis’ views in his scholarly work.
18. “War on Terror a Struggle for Soul of Islam: Bush Aide”. Rediff India. 19 Oct 2015. Available at: <https://www.rediff.com/news/2005/oct/19us.htm>. Accessed on 21 Nov 2018.
19. See Noor, Farish. (n.d.). “Towards a Progressive Islam on Our Own Terms”. Tegenwicht.com. Available at: www.tegenwicht.org/23_fund_en/farish.htm. Accessed on 21 Nov 2018.

20. While there was much debate about and a strong backlash to the emergence of an articulated “Progressive Islam” – however contentious itself – from traditional and conservative Muslim quarters, who dubbed the former “Proggies,” this article is confined to the debates among those who may be broadly described as Muslim liberals, moderates and later “Progressive Muslims,” on one hand, and Muslim leftists, on the other. The battle from the traditional perspective was largely conducted on a blog which was active from October 2004 to July 2007 (See <http://living-tradition.blogspot.com>).
21. This discomfort was not confined to those engaged in the “Progressive Islam” debate. I recall, a few days after the 9/11 attacks, overhearing Hamza Yusuf Hanson and Siraj Wahhaj, both prominent American Muslim leaders, in conversation with each other in the studio of the US TV company, CBS, while waiting for the recording of the program, *60 Minutes*, then hosted by the late Ed Bradley. Hanson and Wahhaj, underestimating my aural capacity, spoke among themselves about their concerns about “this guy [me] who is here today and gone tomorrow and then we have to deal with the fall-out for ‘our people’ of what he says.”
22. One other US-initiative was the short-lived Muslims Against Terrorism (MAT) led by Aasma Khan, a lawyer. MAT was subsequently renamed “Muslim Voices for Peace” and is now defunct.
23. Wahhabism has long been viewed, and not without just cause, as the nemesis by Sufi groups and the more organized sectors or what has been variously been described as “popular” or “folk” or “low” Islam by modernist Muslims. The post-9/11 era, particularly the alleged role of Saudi citizens in the events and the putative role that that religious approach played in the theological formation of the alleged terrorists, has given a much more pronounced tone and energy to anti-Wahhabism.
24. At this stage in history, Safi writes, “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” (1998: 10).
25. The names are presented in alphabetical order and the accompanying descriptions reflect their positions or occupations at that time. Furthermore, this list does not reflect whether people accepted or turned down the invitation. The final list announced by PMUNA at its launch varied considerably from this one and included Hamid Dabashi (1951–), Nawal El-Saadawi (1931–), and Salam Al-Marayati (1960–). Extensive enquiries to 11 persons on this list show that other than being included in an e-mail list, there were no actual meetings nor any consequential discussion between members. A number did not reply to a single e-mail including the one inviting them to join. Kahf, Muqtedar Khan, and Ibish, the Vice-Chair, were the only ones on the list who publicly identified with PMUNA and who defended the organization. A note circulated to the Advisory Board dated 20 October 2004 only included the names of Eltantawy, Al-Marayati, Kahf, Muqtedar Khan, Ahmed, Seeme Khan, Ramadan, Wadud, and Abunimah. In e-mail correspondence with me, three of these said that they never replied to the invitations to serve on the board and were not engaged in any organizational correspondence with its leadership. The nature and roles of Advisory Boards do admittedly differ, rarely include offering “advice,” and often only serve the purpose of establishing funding relationships or providing some form of community or ideological legitimacy. They do, however, also confer honor on and recognition of those invited to serve on them and this was the key issue that NPM had with many individuals invited.
26. Itrath Syed, one of the NPM leaders, may have been speaking for the most of the NPM collective when she told the *Vancouver Sun* that “the international controversy has been ‘emotionally difficult’ for her, because she admires Safi and Nassef and, until recently, considered them friends” (“Progressive Muslims Take Heat” 2004). I have no doubt that Safi and Eltantawy would have expressed similarly sentiments in relation to us in NPM.

27. Ibish writes “referring to my personal religious opinions. I am, and have since I was a very young child (probably around age 6 or 7, believe it or not), been a committed agnostic. This means that I’m skeptical about everything, including all the claims of all major religions and the claims of atheism as well” (Ibishblog. Retrieved 16 September 2010).
28. In a more recent statement, Zakaria (2015) said, “I am not a practicing Muslim. The last time I was in a mosque, except as a tourist, was decades ago. My wife is Christian, and we have not raised our children as Muslims. My views on faith are complicated – somewhere between deism and agnosticism.”
29. The inclusion of the Maliks, who, according to *The Denver Post*, “held the distinction of being a top national fundraiser for President George W. Bush” (13 July 2010), raised the most fury in the PMUNA debate and none of the PMUNA leadership figures ever attempted an explanation for their inclusion on the Advisory Board, although they went to extraordinary lengths to distance themselves from the Republican Party in an election season.
30. Its founding members were Omid Safi (1970–) then an academic at Colgate University who served as its first Chairperson, Ahmed Nassef (1966–), a worker in the public relations field who was its Executive Director, Hussein Ibish (1963–), who served as Deputy Chairperson, and Sarah Eltantawi, then a student activist and community worker, as its Communications Officer.
31. In a curious twist of fate, given that Fatah was at the inception of its earlier predecessor, the Toronto-based Network for Progressive Muslims, he was the last surviving PMUNA member.

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