

REVIEW ARTICLES

PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

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The purpose of the review article is to present collective aspirations of a group of Muslim thinkers and activists who call themselves 'progressive Muslims' and to analyse the ways these aspirations are engaged by the contributors to: Safi, Omid (ed.): *Progressive Muslims. On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*. Oxford, Oneworld 2003. 351pp. ISBN 1-85168-316-X

Recently the attention of Islamic studies has turned to the growing efforts of a group of Muslim intellectuals to reformulate the elements of the Islamic tradition and to open new channels of inquiry in order to solve the problems of the Muslim societies of today. We can mention such personalities as Abdolkarim Soroush, Nurcholish Madjid, Abdullahi an-Na'im, Amina Wadud, Khaled Abu el-Fadl, Farish Ahmad-Noor and Farid Esack to name just a few. They have made a crucial and in some cases revolutionary contribution to contemporary Muslim thought. Various labels have been attached to this phenomenon, all of which carry their own connotations and some are heavily burdened historically. The theoretical achievements and activism of these intellectuals is sometimes presented as an 'Islamic reformation', 'progressive Islam', 'Islamic modernism', and 'liberal Islam', to name the most common appellations. The name 'progressive' was appropriated by a number of activists and scholars from various parts of the Muslim world in the Progressive Muslim Network (PMN) late in 1998 on the internet.

The genesis of the *Progressive Muslims* volume took place in the aftermath of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Individually and as a group, several Muslim scholars of Islam, who represent a diversity of specializations, horrified and stunned by the loss of innocent lives, were also distraught at the damage the attacks had done to the reputation of Muslims everywhere. In an intense dialogue they realized a need to get away from the standard apologetic presentation of Islam and all the simplistic solutions on offer. Aware of the fact that complicated problems call for equally complicated analyses and an-

swers, they opted for a path of critical engagement with both their own traditions and modernity.

Having considered such terms as 'reform', 'liberal', 'critical', the editor of the present volume has chosen the adjective 'progressive', well aware of the fact that any historical instance of 'progress' will obligatorily be compromised in any number of ways.¹ However, as Bruce Robbins argues, that does not mean that it is so contaminated as to be unsayable; we are not so rich of instances that we can throw any out in the name of an ideal purity (Robbins 2000 : 165). Omid Safi understands 'progressive' as an umbrella term signifying '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' (18). Characteristic of the general mode of the essays – and highly sympathetic – is the fact that the title of the book reads 'Progressive Muslims', not 'Progressive Islam'. Using this title the authors call for an engagement with real human beings who understand themselves as Muslims, not an idealized abstract notion of Islam.

Progressives see themselves as both a continuation and radical departure from the hundred and fifty year old tradition of liberalism in Muslim countries. In their view liberal advocates of Islam in most cases uncritically identify with modernity and generally avoid any critique of imperialism and colonialism both of its nineteenth century manifestation and its contemporary forms. Many self-styled 'liberal Muslims' in their opinion too eagerly identified themselves with European and American structures of power and, as a result, proved unable to adopt a critical stance against the injustice of both Muslim and Western societies. In the words of Omid Safi progressive Muslims espouse a critical and non-apologetic 'multiple critique' with respect to both Islam and modernity. In their approach to modernity they are undoubtedly postmodern. The double engagement with the varieties of Islam and modernity, together with the emphasis on concrete social action and transformation, is in his opinion the defining characteristic of progressive Islam today (ISIM 2003, 13).

Although the editor expressly denies that his Introduction is meant as a 'progressive Muslim manifesto', the reader will probably perceive it as such. The author points to the fundamental values that are central to the notion of a progressive Muslim identity. These values include social justice, gender justice and pluralism. He then elaborates on what he sees as the key agenda of progressive Muslims and at the same time makes it clear that in many respects there are substantial differences of opinion among the fifteen contributors to the volume. All of them, however, agree on the basic principle of progressive Muslim scholarship – the absolute necessity of a serious engagement with the full spectrum of Islamic thought and practices. On the one hand the engagement with the textual and material sources

¹ In her well-known essay 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-colonialism'', Anne McClintock demonstrates how the word 'progress' is entangled with a history of racism and Eurocentric self-congratulation (1994, 291-303).

of the Islamic tradition is imperative for differentiating progressive Muslim activism, for example, from secular socialist ideologies with an Islamic veneer, but on the other hand this engagement should challenge the great impoverishment of Islamic thought and spirit brought forth by Muslim literalists such as the Wahhabis. Progressives see their striving for justice as firmly rooted in the Islamic tradition, in the Qur'an. Progressive Muslims hold that the time has come to translate the social ideals of the Qur'an so that people can relate to them today. The editor underlines the fact that adherents of progressive Islam stress universal notion of justice and, unlike most Muslim thinkers, show genuine concern for global problems, political, social and environmental, challenging above all abysmal inequalities between the rich and the poor. Progressive Muslims are unanimous in their demand for gender justice: they firmly believe that Muslim community as a whole cannot achieve justice unless justice is guaranteed for Muslim women. They see gender equality as a measuring stick for the broader concerns of social justice and pluralism (11). The lack of pluralism in Muslim societies in their eyes is characterized by the growth of violence and loss of humaneness of interpersonal ethics. Pluralism for them also means openness to engage sources of compassion and wisdom no matter where they come from. Elsewhere (ISIM 13) Omid Safi admits that progressive Muslim epistemology openly draws from sources outside the Islamic tradition such as the liberation theology of Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Rebecca S. Chopp, as well as the secular humanism of Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, etc. They want 'to combine a Qur'anic call for serving as 'witness for God in justice' (Qur'an 42:15), with an Edward Said-ian call to 'speak truth to the powers'.²

The book is divided into three parts. *Part I* Progressive Muslims and Contemporary Islam, *Part II* Progressive Muslims and Gender Justice, and *Part III* Progressive Muslims and Pluralism.

PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS AND CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

The author of the first essay, 'The ugly modern and the modern ugly: reclaiming the beautiful in Islam' (33 – 77), Professor of Law, Khaled Abou el-Fadl, is exploring what he calls the vulgarization of contemporary Islam. By this he means the recurrence of events that shock the conscience of most human beings, such as the death sentence against Salman Rushdie, the stoning and imprisoning of rape victims in Pakistan and Nigeria, the treatment of women by the Taliban and the vicious 9/11 terrorist attack. Unlike some Muslim apologists the author refuses to see these atrocities as aberrational fanaticism that can be considered marginal and unrepresentative. In his words "such acts are preceded by social dynamics that desensitize and deconstruct society's sense of moral virtue and ethics. Especially, as far as theological constructs are concerned, the commission of and social responses to acts of cruelty typically undergo a long process of indoctrination and

² The ideal of an intellectual who 'speaks truth to the power' is thoroughly discussed in Bruce Robbins' 'Secularism, Elitism, Progress and Other Transgressions' (2000, p.157-168).

acculturation that both facilitate the commission of such acts and mute or mitigate the sense of social outrage upon the commission of offensive behavior" (39). The essay connects this social dynamics with a supremacist and puritanical orientation in Islam that has been born of a siege mentality as a byproduct of colonialism and modernity. The prime concern of this orientation is power.

Anyone searching for the roots of puritanical tendencies in Islam has to engage with the notorious eighteenth century Islamic movement known as Wahhabism. The influence the Wahhabi ideology still exercises today is common knowledge. In Professor El-Fadl's view, however, Wahhabism, given its marginal origin and rather crude form, could not have found resonance in broad areas of the Muslim world under its own banner. It spread after being filtered through the nineteenth century Muslim reform movement, known as Salafism. The author underlines the characteristic features these movements have in common and, although he recognizes the existence of serious differences between the two, he believes that the similarities are such that these orientations can be seen as one. To simplify matters El Fadl has decided to call this phenomenon 'Salafabism' which he characterizes as supremacist puritanism that compensates for feelings of defeat and alienation in Muslim societies with a distinct sense of self-righteous arrogance towards the other – the West, the unbeliever, the heretic, and even the Muslim woman. Acts of violence, perpetrated these days in the name of Islam are manifestations of thinking that values the sense of control and power regardless of their moral aspects. The consequences of this kind of mental environment for Muslim intellectual activities are fatal. In the defensive post-colonial atmosphere efforts to engage critically with the Islamic tradition and the search for the moral and humanistic aspect of the intellectual heritage of Islam are clearly not welcome and even not tolerated.

El-Fadl's well-documented essay is rich in new insights into the development of puritanical and dangerously antiintellectual tendencies in modern Islam. His argument that the deconstruction of the traditional institutions of Islamic learning and religious authority in the age of modernity makes the puritan challenge today particularly threatening to the humanistic tradition in Islam is worth closer attention.

In the second text, 'In search of progressive Islam beyond 9/11' Farid Esack differentiates between progressivism and liberalism and surveys the history of progressive Islam, featuring the Progressive Muslim Network (PMN) which began on the internet in 1998. He critiques liberal Islam, in particular for making the powerful its primary subject and for its acceptance of peace with an unjust status quo. The author presents the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon as the clash of two religious fundamentalisms: the fundamentalism of the Market and the worst of Muslim fundamentalism. Unfortunately the text does not always resist the temptation to present the post- 9/11 situation in a rather pamphletic manner which seems to be out of step with the general mood of the present volume.

The author of the the third essay, 'Islam: a civilizational project in progress' (98-110), Ahmet Karamustafa, sets out to define Islam and settles with the civilizational definition of Islam as the most meaningful. In his view Islamic civilization is dynamic, it interacts with the cultures it comes into contact with and is adaptable to most human communities on the globe. While all civilizational tradi-

tions are dynamic, only Buddhism, Christianity and Secular Humanism (Western civilization) are also interactive and global. The author expresses his conviction that as one of only several truly global and inclusively interactive civilizational projects on our globe, Islam will remain a major civilizational resource in the future.

Ebrahim Moosa's 'Debts and burdens of critical Islam' (111 – 127) can be usefully compared with El-Fadl's text discussed above. Both texts critique Islamic reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. El-Fadl speaks from the position of the best of Islamic jurisprudence of the past and blames the modernists for transforming Islam into a politically reactive force engaged in a mundane struggle for self-determination. Ebrahim Moosa, however, believes the contemporary intellectuals should moderate their criticism of their predecessors. Informed by postmodern thinking he argues that the reformists' assessment of modernity differed from ours. What he sees as unfortunate and with serious consequences is the fact that these modernists never internalized modernity.³ Constantly under the threat of excommunication from the traditional *'ulama* they dared not subject the corpus of the historical Islamic learning to the critical scrutiny of the modern episteme,⁴ and those who did, paid for their venture dearly.

In the essay the author focuses his attention on the most troubling of all intellectual issues facing Muslim communities, on the area of Islamic law (*shari'ah*). He characterizes the dominant Muslim discourse concerning Islamic law as predominantly apologetic. Trying to justify the past by today's standards contemporary Muslims do not hesitate to distort history. Embarrassed by such rules as marriage to minors or the death penalty for adultery they attempt to argue them away. Muslims of today do not seem to be able to engage in discourse of such issues as justice or equality unless there is some support for these issues in a scripture or in a pronouncement of some learned authority of the past (122). Such perpetually retrospective approach to religious understanding is, in the author's view, the sign of a profound lack of dynamism among the contemporary adherents of the tradition. This retrospective approach shows that Muslims dis-

³ "In the Arab and Islamic case, modernisation has always been a deformed superimposition; it had appeared as an attack or the repercussion of a previous attack. Modernity has to be nationalized; it must be acclimatized and wedded to our deep personality. The truth is that modernity has sprung free from its country of origin and is now in universal orbit. To grasp it in its universal dimension, to integrate it and make it ours, to add to it and express it in the language of our own particularity, this is our primary goal: it is the dialectic of perpetuity in renovation" (Hichem Djait: 1994, 152).

⁴ The prominent representative of modern Islamic hermeneutics Muhammad Arkoun believes that the reasons why philosophical critique of sacred texts continues to be rejected by Muslim scholarly opinion are both political and psychological. Politically, in the absence of democracy, the Qur'an plays an indispensable role in the process of legitimization of the states, psychologically, after the failure of the Mu'tazilite school, Muslims believe that all the pages bound together as *mushaf* contain the very word of God (Arkoun 1994 : 35).

⁵ Peter Mandeville believes that contrary to the popular images of Muslim culture as backward-looking, there is evidence that pragmatism leads many Muslims to engage in a critical reformulation of tradition in an effort to adapt to life in a globalizing world (ISIM Newsletter, 12).

credit the legitimacy of their experience in the present and refuse to allow this experience to be the grounds for innovation, change and adaptation.⁵ In the author's view this mentality has reached pathological proportions in this generation of Muslims and is symptomatic of their despair.

All strands of contemporary Islam, be it modernists, fundamentalists or neo-traditionalists, are faced by the fundamental problem of interpreting the sacred text. Only recently the interpreters have become aware of the complexities of their task. Modern Islamic scholarship has shown that since the time the Qur'an was revealed up to now it has been subject to multiple uses, it has a political history. It is therefore crucial to study the different communities of the Qur'an, otherwise we cannot make sense of the revelation. In the author's view letting the Qur'an speak without the community of the Qur'an is the pattern that lies behind much contemporary interpreting, especially that of Muslim feminists.⁶ 'Generations of Muslim scholars have correctly stated that the Qur'an advocates patriarchal norms since that was the historical condition in which the Qur'an was revealed. By privileging a few verses and then suggesting that these isolated and singular verses should control the meaning and interpretation of numerous other verses ... is nothing short of hermeneutical acrobatics or a hermeneutics of wishful thinking' (125). In the writer's view glossing the text with anti-patriarchal virtues is not a warrant of liberation or egalitarianism. He claims that norms are not simply provided by the revealed text, they are made in conversation with that text.

The author admits there is enormous burden on Muslim intellectuals who are expected to provide solutions where there is little hope of finding any. He speaks of a painstaking and soul-searching intellectual quest that must be embraced boldly, creatively and patiently. His essay is a serious attempt to proceed in that direction.

Tazim R. Kassam's 'On being a scholar of Islam: risks and responsibilities' (128 – 144) can be seen as a suitable closing of *Part I*. The text is a clear reflection on the role of being a scholar of Islamic studies, especially in the post- 11/9 world. The tragedy brought into sharper focus the challenges and risks faced by experts in Islamic studies in the academe, in Muslim communities and in Western society at large. In the emotionally charged atmosphere old prejudices were revived. Given the lack of rudimentary knowledge about Islam in the general public and the almost total dependency of most American citizens on the press, TV experts, talk shows etc. serious attempts to communicate intelligently can have only limited impact. Nevertheless the writer expresses her conviction that the scholars of Islam have to accept the obligations of public intellectuals to explain highly complex matters such as conflicts within the Muslim world, the relations between the colonial and neo-colonial powers and their subjects, the impact of U.S. foreign policy on the Middle East and so on. She believes in the possibility of finding ways to create discourses of the middle way where polarizing and generalizing language used for discussing contentious matters is resisted and the lack of historical and cultural knowledge in the West about Islam and in the Muslim world about Western civilization is addressed.

⁶ see Moghissi, H. (2002 : 140).

PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS AND GENDER JUSTICE

The texts reflect the progressive Muslims' heavy emphasis on issues of gender and their strong support for Islamic feminism. Sa'diyya Shaikh in her 'Transforming feminisms: Islam, women and the gender justice' (148 – 162) reminds the reader that the debates on feminism, gender and women's rights in Islam cannot be separated from a larger civilizational polemics between the Islamic world and the West. In the last decades of the twentieth century the dominant strands of Western feminism became subject to extensive critique.⁷ Feminists from the post-colonial countries and African-American womanists argued that Western feminism primarily reflected Western realities and protested against the attempts of Western feminists to apply Western standards as superior norms. Under the impact of the Third World feminism and post-modernism various understandings and articulations of feminism have developed. Among these the author detects a range of Muslim gender activism or Islamic feminisms.⁸ She observes that the term 'feminism' is slowly being accepted in spite of its Western origin. It enables the Muslim women to situate their activities in a global landscape and puts at their disposal a useful vocabulary which feminism has created. At the same time the author acknowledges the considerable limitations Islamic feminists must be aware of: they have to navigate the terrain between being critical of sexist interpretations of Islam and patriarchy in their religious communities, while simultaneously criticizing the neo-colonial feminist discourse of Islam (155). She, however, disagrees with those who speak of 'difficult double commitment' of Islamic feminists on the one hand to a faith position, and on the other hand to women's rights. The author claims that most Muslim feminists do not see Islam and women's rights as belonging to different domains, they understand their feminism as emerging organically from their faith. Islam for them is a primary source of understanding one's very being in the world (156). The reader can only agree with the author's conclusion that 'Islamic feminism is . . . one of the most engaged contemporary responses to the core Qur'anic injunction for social justice of our time' (159).

The last essay in *Part II*, Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons's 'Are we up to the challenge? The need for a radical re-ordering of the Islamic discourse on women' (235 – 248) assumes an unequivocal feminist position. The author started her social engagement as an African-American Christian woman who had been on the frontlines of her people's struggle against race apartheid in the US since her student years. As she confesses she has been strengthened in her belief about the equality of women by a Sufi mystic, Sheikh Bawa, who introduced her to Islam, 'an Islam of justice, truth, beauty, and grace' (238). Trying to reconcile her Sufi vision with the hard reality of societies that call themselves Muslim, she, too,

⁷ see Drozdíková, J. (2002 : 71).

⁸ Nadjé Al-Ali argues that many women she interviewed in Egypt rejected the label 'feminist' for pragmatic and ideological reasons. Among these women the term evokes antagonism and animosity. Their reluctance to use the term is also linked to the conviction that it detracts from 'larger issues' such as imperialism or class (2000 : 4).

blames the patriarchal interpretation of the Islamic sacred texts. However, it seems that she puts greater hope on practical activism than on interpretory battles. Her text usefully complements the previous one.

Kecia Ali's 'Progressive Muslims and Islamic jurisprudence: the necessity for critical engagement with marriage and divorce law' (163 – 189) belongs in our view to the best in the volume. In her essay the author addresses two types of modern discourses on Islamic law which she defines as conservative and feminist-apologist. She criticizes both for selectively upholding some substantive doctrines of Islamic law and setting aside others, but her focus is on the apologist approach of some modern feminists. Scholars working from this perspective argue, against Western and some Muslim feminist argument to the contrary, that women are guaranteed numerous marital rights by Islamic law, they only have to learn how to invoke them to protect themselves. This view has gained widespread attention recently and has been adopted by many Muslim women organizations. As a matter of fact it is an attempt to prove that Islamic law is not unremittingly patriarchal.⁹

The author argues that by focusing on isolated rights without taking into account the whole structure of interdependent spousal obligations feminist apologists implicitly accept the marriage contract as understood by Muslim jurists as the divinely sanctioned norm for Islamic marriage. She proceeds to demonstrate that in traditional jurisprudence 'the overall framework of marriage contract is predicated on a type of ownership (*milk*) granted to the husband over the wife in exchange for a dower payment, which makes sexual intercourse between them lawful. Further, the major spousal right established by the contract is the wife's sexual availability in exchange for which she is supported by her husband' (165). This arrangement also gives the husband unilateral right to terminate the marriage at any time. The author stresses the circumstance that the laws formulated by traditional jurisprudence are results of interpretation by particular men living and thinking at a specific time. Their thinking was not shaped by misogyny, but rather by the assumptions from which they began, including the notion that marriage can be usefully compared to slavery or to a commercial transaction (183). This analysis shows that the doctrines of traditional jurisprudence are entirely inadequate to serve as the basis for laws governing Muslim families and societies today. A new jurisprudence is required. Such change cannot be achieved by strategies of contractual stipulations which should secure women's rights in a world of patriarchal injustice and inequality. Qualified Muslims are needed to explore traditional jurisprudence and its methods and then work to replace it. The author understands her essay as a preliminary step in the direction of comprehension. It is to be wished that others will follow equipped with the same scholarly standard and ethical resolve.

'Sexuality, diversity, and ethics in the agenda of progressive Muslims' written by Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (190 – 234) deals with the issue of homosexuality

⁹ Heideh Moghissi in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Chapter 2 (From orientalism to Islamic feminism) draws a complex picture of the relations of the feminist apologist views to fundamentalism and postmodern relativism (2002).

which has recently come to the fore in Muslim societies (in 2001 police in Cairo arrested 52 allegedly 'gay men' at a night club and tried them in Cairo State Security Court). In his article once again the author is confronted with the problem of scriptural interpretation, although the Qur'an itself does not address homosexuality. It does not contain any word meaning 'homosexuality' as an abstract idea or word 'homosexual' as designation of a man or woman practicing same-sex relations. The terms that became popular in Arabic later are *liwat* for acts associated with same-sex relations, and *luti* for a man or woman associated with such acts. These expressions are derived from the name of Prophet Lut in the Qur'an (Lot of the Hebrew Bible). The Lut story is a constant reference for Muslims' understanding of homosexual relationships. The Divine punishment for Lut's people became equated with a condemnation of homosexuality.

Contemporary scholars who acknowledge the injustice against gay and lesbian Muslims have begun to approach the problem with the same moral conviction as feminist scholars fighting patriarchal power. They use the same critical techniques, the same interpretive tools which their feminist predecessors have developed. The author calls the kind of interpretation that can be used by gay and lesbian readers of the Qur'an 'sexually sensitive' interpretation. In his opinion there are two basic strategies important for sexually sensitive reading of the Qur'an: semantic analysis and thematic analysis. They are designed to move beyond traditional Qur'anic interpretation which is based on verse-by-verse analysis that decontextualizes the moments of revelation and freezes their meaning. "The ethical imperatives of the Qur'an can be understood by looking at how its words relate to each other; in effect, its words 'define themselves' by grouping into clusters of relationships in 'semantic fields' (205). A thematic analysis identifies a single theme, traces its appearance through the Qur'an trying to provide a composite picture of the theme, trusting that there is a thematic unity under all these instances. This type of analysis searches for an inner unity of the Qur'an beyond the juridical rulings of the *Shari'ah*.

Using the above-mentioned strategies in a lengthy and detailed analysis the author has come to the conclusion that punishment for same-sex acts as enforced by jurists is based on legal analogy, not on literal interpretation, and is of questionable legal validity. Having read the text the reader must inevitably ask: can such sexuality-sensitive interpretation serve any purpose besides intellectual satisfaction? Like many Christians and Jews, Muslims who identify as gay or lesbian tend to put religion behind them in reaction to the rejection they experience from their families and traditions. They doubt that any rapprochement with the *Shari'ah* can be reached. The author seems to accept these doubts as legitimate. As an answer, he lets the Islamic legal scholar Abdullahi an-Na'im express his opinion:

"We have Muslim demands for self-determination by the application of Islamic law in public life. Yet such Islamic law cannot possibly be *Shari'ah* as historically established. The only way to reconcile these competing imperatives for change in the public law of Muslim countries is to develop a version of public law which is compatible with modern standards of constitutionalism, criminal justice, international law, and human rights... We can then proceed to resolve the conflict and

tension within the framework of Islam as a whole, albeit not necessarily within the framework of the historical Shari'ah."

PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS AND PLURALISM

Three essays in this section address the situation of Muslim communities in America and complete each other. The article by Amir Hussain, 'Muslims, pluralism and interfaith dialogue' (251 – 269) explores the relationships that modern North American Muslims have had with people of other religious traditions. He deals with the situation in Canada which is historically far more conflict-free than the situation in the US as Amina Wadud in her text ('American Muslim identity: race and ethnicity in progressive Islam', 270 – 285) clearly shows. Muslim immigrants to Canada did not find any local Muslim communities there as immigrants to the US did. These were communities formed by African-Americans who were looking for alternative religious and spiritual articulations to address the problems of identity and race (276). Although these groups did not sustain the integrity of the Islamic dogma, they defined themselves as Islamic.¹⁰ It took some time before the first African-American Sunni communities were established between the 1950s and 1970s. The author argues that the expression 'American Islam' obscures profound differences across the ethnic and racial background of Muslims in America. Besides, there is the problem of immigrant Muslim hegemony over leadership roles related to their financial resources and international contacts. The author warns that matters of class or racial injustice do not receive enough attention in progressive discussions. In our view, however, the causes of the tensions between the two communities are far more complex than the author claims them to be due to specific characteristics of the native African-American Islam.

Marcia Hermansen's 'How to put the genie back in the bottle? "Identity Islam" and Muslim Youth cultures in America' focuses, as the title says, on the young Muslim generation in the US, the youth who are primarily raised in America and born of parents who emigrated from the Middle East or South Asia. The picture the author draws is not only unpleasant, it is frightening. With some hesitation she decided to explore what she calls 'a destructive, arrogant and nasty energy which has been allowed to run unchecked and has even been encouraged by mainstream Muslim organizations in America' (307). The purpose of her text is to analyse the causes of such shocking phenomena as the satisfaction expressed by some students at the destruction and loss of life on September 11, and to suggest strategies for 'putting the genie back'. Her analysis points to the identity problem experienced by Muslim teenagers who are encouraged by their communities to dis-identify with American culture and political environment and at the same time are alienated from their country of origin as they no longer have the necessary language competency and cultural knowledge. This situation drives them to embrace a culture-free global Islamic militancy. This cultureless 'identity Islam' is being

¹⁰ For the explanation of the origin and development of African-American religious movements that chose to call themselves Islamic see Gilles Kepel: *Allah in the West*, 1997, 9 – 78.

widely propagated by internationalist Muslim revivalist movements such as Jama'at Islami. The author characterizes it as 'a mindless and rigid rejection of 'the Other' and a creation of a de-cultured, rule-based space where one asserts Muslim 'difference' based on gender segregation, romantic recreation of madrasa experiences, and the most blatantly apologetic articulations of Islam. It replaces spirituality with arrogance and smug pride in one's superior manifestation of visible symbols of identity' (310). This kind of Islam thrives on campuses after being adopted by the Muslim student organizations such as MSA (Muslim Student Association). It is supported by the circulation on the campuses of extremist materials such as Hizb-e Tahrir¹¹ newsletters. Hermansen does not say what impact, if any, the identity Islam she describes has on the native African-American Muslim youth culture. She concludes with the observation that the Muslim community in America is passing through a critical period. Much will depend on the educational and social experiences of Muslim youth at the universities where they should be exposed to balanced and historical treatment of Islam by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.

Ahmad S. Moussalli in 'Islamic democracy and pluralism' (286 – 305) tries to set democracy and pluralism into an Islamic frame. The author claims that 'the notion of democracy and pluralism are not only in harmony with Islamic thought, but that the seeds of these notions are embodied in many notions of government and politics in Islamic political and religious thought' (288). His article makes sharp distinctions between Islam as a divine belief system and the Islamic state as a humanly developed political system and claims that this distinction can open new possibilities of interpretation. In the author's view the history of Islam shows that any abstract and non-historical understanding turns the human into the Divine and, consequently, into an uncompromising metaphysical and meta-historical entity (293). The revival of Islam in his view needs re-examination and demystification of history and centering of responsibility on human actions.

The author describes the historical and political background which fosters the popular demand for the Islamist solution of the problem of democracy and pluralism in Muslim societies. In most countries of the Muslim world today's political contexts are not much different from medieval and classical contexts. While most Muslim countries have institutions like parliaments and parties, these institutions are used to cover the tyrannical aspects of state manipulation. Such regimes alienated people from these institutions and made them try to find indigenous institutions that could be used to counterbalance the oppressive nature of Islamic regimes. Religious doctrines cannot be challenged or manipulated by the state, otherwise the state would lose its legitimacy. The religionization of democracy in the form of *shura* has to be seen as a quest for empowerment vis-à-vis the oppressive state. Thus moderate Islamism may blend the culture of the Muslim world with that of the West, for it is providing Islamic arguments for the adoption of human rights, pluralism and democracy.

¹¹ Hizb-e Tahrir, a radical fringe group, founded in the Middle East, has a following among diaspora Muslim youth both in America and in Europe.

This view is consistent with the thesis, that for Muslims the problem of modernity is sociological, not cosmological (Woodward 2002 : 140). While Christianity explicitly abrogates the legal system of the Hebrew Bible, Islam remains very much the religion of law. However, as the history of Islamic jurisprudence clearly demonstrates, the sociological components of religion have proved to be far more flexible than cosmologic truth claims. The author quotes Bassam Tibi's argument that the seeming tension between Islam and modernity can be resolved only if Islamic theologians succeed in creating an 'Oriental Islamic variant' of a world technological/scientific social order. Similarly Esposito (1996: 14) claims that in the global environment of the present, narrow and parochial understandings of such concepts as democracy are dangerous and limiting. Indeed, deparochialization of democracy (in Islamic and other ways) is to be hoped for.

What is the victory of Islam? Towards a different understanding of the *ummah* and political success in the contemporary world. Farish A. Noor. (320 – 322)

With the last essay the book has come full circle. The author asks: how can Muslims extricate themselves from the mess in which they find themselves and which is partly of their own making? He recognizes two main problems: the simplistic oppositional dialectics and the relationship between ethics and politics in Islam. 'Dialectical opposition flies in the face of Islamic ethics and undermines the universal basis of Islam...by creating and perpetuating not only false dichotomies but also violent hierarchies between the self and other'(324). The author contends that Muslims will not be able to communicate the message and values of Islam to the world as long as they view the rest of the world as alien and antithetical to them. What is needed is the reconceptualization of the *umma* that gives equal recognition and respect to the other as well. In the author's words Muslims must relearn the rules and norms of communication (325). The Muslim world must recognize and accept the multiplicity within itself. This will open the way for recognizing the multiplicity of the other. The recognition of the other as similar to the self is the first step towards building alliances.

The universality of Islam is contained in the writer's notion of *Islam bi la hudud*, Islam truly universal. Farish Noor believes that this concept can help Muslims solve such problems as that of Palestine which has to be seen for what it is, a conflict over territory, not a religious one. Truly universal Islam also means gender equality, since without gender justice there is no universal justice. It will recognize the necessity to come up with a response to such issues as the destruction of the ozone layer, the spread of AIDS, the drug trafficking, exploitation of children and other global problems.

Farish Noor's heavy involvement in practical human rights work in Malaysia gives his grand vision of *Islam bi la hudud* considerable weight and even mobilizing force. Social activism is typical for other writers as well (Amina Wadud, Farid Esack). As Omid Safi puts it in his Introduction - vision without activism quickly becomes irrelevant (7). There are undoubtedly important links between Muslim intellectualism and social activism today.

The essays published in the book are destined primarily for the most highly educated Muslim audience. Products of competent scholarship and innovative

hermeneutics, they are also demonstration of intellectual courage and honesty. What is a disadvantage on one side – conformity to a Western normative ideal with little basis in the reality of contemporary Muslim culture limits its impact in Muslim intellectual sphere – makes the volume an important contribution to the more comprehensive understanding of contemporary Muslim thought and culture in the West.

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