Building a Reform Movement: Could Muslims Emulate Nineteenth Century Judaism?

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This is a teaser chapter for a forthcoming edited volume from E-International Relations – Nations Under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century

Let us start from the premise, though not all social scientists would agree, that religious doctrines generate their own ideological dynamic distinct from the markers of language, ethnicity and class–albeit often overlapping with them. The oldest religions have accreted over many centuries through the deployment of potent symbolic power by means of the communication media of their day. It has been convincingly argued that the Islamic tradition is particularly conducive to politicization, and a crisis of authority within Islam has been diagnosed [1]. Dispassionate debate on this topic is made harder by the long history of domination of the Muslim world by colonial powers, by current geopolitical conflicts and tensions, and by the anti-Muslim prejudice (usually characterized as "Islamophobia" despite the objections to this word as implying a passive, quasi-medical condition) which has been exacerbated in the West by economic stress and probably by the collapse of Communism as a bugbear. I hope to show that, whereas a tradition of progressive Islamic thought can be traced back for at least a century and includes some highly articulate personalities today, it has not yet coalesced into a movement. Thus a vacuum is left that can be filled by more ambiguous religious leaders claiming to occupy a "middle ground"–in Arabic, *al-wasatiyya*. Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the Egyptian scholar born in 1926 and now resident in Qatar, was the most prominent claimant to this ground in 2014, though recently he appeared to be losing his influence after pressure was applied by Saudi Arabia on the rulers of Qatar to reduce the support they had given to the Muslim Brotherhood, of which he is the spiritual leader [2].

Over forty countries with Muslim majorities were ruled in the past by European powers (including Russia), while a few others such as Iran and Afghanistan belonged to what has been called an "informal empire". It is possible to apply towards Islam the same kind of decentring, or deprovincialization of the West, that social anthropologists have been used to apply towards "indigenous" societies, except that the Islamic tradition has been as universalizing and proselytizing as Christianity. Classical Islamic political thought had assumed an expansion of Muslim rule (*dar al-islam*) rather than its contraction. For some five to ten centuries an Islamic "world system" was at the centre of world civilization and hegemony; now, as Abelwahab Meddeb has written, Islam is "unconsolable in its destitution" [3]. Muslims responded to their domination by Europe in various ways: through military resistance, through exodus or opting out of politics, and through accommodation [4]. The current geopolitical crisis in the Middle East is of unprecedented complexity, as a result of the rise of the petrodollar states, the "Islamic resurgence" with its violent extremist edge, the fall of Communism, the tragic and apparently irresolvable Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the "war on terror" with its squandering of American military power, the return of Russia to its previous global role, the deepening of the Sunni–Shia divide, the retaliatory spirit provoked in the Muslim tribal periphery by heavy-handed repression [5] and intensified anti-Muslim prejudice in the West. Here I will focus only on the contribution that interpretations of Islamic doctrine make to the present-day imbroglio.

We may discard the theory that the Islamic scriptures lead inevitably to bigotry. It is part of the genius of the great religions that they are able to give an impression of immobility while continuously changing, and Islam like Christianity has been capable of extensive accommodation with diverse local circumstances while also inspiring great

achievements in intellectual life and the arts. However, a scrupulous comparison by the historian Michael Cook between Sunni Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity (mainly Catholic) as resources for political engagement in the global South has provided persuasive evidence that, whereas no tradition is a reliable predictor of the behaviour of those who inherit it, just as surely traditions are not interchangeable [6]. All Third World populations, Cook argues, need to choose between defiance towards the richer nations and cooperation with them; also between conservation of heritage and adoption of Western institutions and values. He finds that the Islamic heritage provides a wider choice of political possibilities than the others that he has analysed. Extreme rejectionism and absolutism come to the fore in some parts of the Muslim world. But there is another form of Islamism that is much more eclectic and "modernizing"–stressing for instance opportunities for women outside the home, egalitarianism as an Islamic principle, and scriptural authorization of peaceful relations with non-Muslims. Reviewing the possible future of Islamist movements, Cook sees little chance of their dying out, at least in the short term, though he thinks it conceivable that large numbers of Muslims may gradually be attracted by a less politicized version of their religion.

Can we envisage an Islamic renaissance? With a qualified nod of recognition to Arnold Toynbee, the anthropologist Jack Goody has argued that there have been many renaissances in history as well as the standard European example [7]. Islam experienced over the centuries a number of temporary and local efflorescences, including the rediscovery of Greek scientific literature under the Baghdad-based Abbasid caliphate, and the magnificent mosque architecture still to be seen in Cairo and Istanbul. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) has been hailed as a founding father of the social sciences. But Goody leaves us to come to our own judgment about the present day.

The word "renaissance" is indeed often used to translate the Arabic term Al-Nahda, a period of modernization and reform that began in Egypt in the late nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. But the geopolitical crisis of the Arab–Islamic world today is partly explained by the problem diagnosed in the Arab Human Development Report 2003: "[The] Arab world must turn outwards and immerse itself in the global knowledge stream" [8]. Despite energetic steps to strengthen research and education in the decade since publication of that report, the social sciences in particular remain weak throughout the heartlands of Islam; and without help from the social sciences, religious adherents run the risk of having access only to an insider's view of their faith. A full-blown renaissance seems far off at the moment–with due respect to the many thoughtful and talented Muslim *individuals* working in every walk of life, including some impressively articulate intellectuals [9].

But what about a reformation comparable to that which created the Protestant Churches in the sixteenth century? The call for an Islamic reformation has been voiced for over a hundred years, more recently by (among others) the social anthropologist Dale Eickelman, who has written about Muhammad Shahrur's widely circulated *The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Interpretation* (1990) that "it may one day be seen as a Muslim equivalent of the 95 Theses that Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church in 1517" [10]. Eickelman's cautious prediction may well be proved correct in time, though in fact the Protestant Reformation set off forces of intolerance that led to bloodshed as heavy as what we now see in Iraq or Pakistan; so this is not the most encouraging parallel.

A more apposite exemplar for Islam is the rise of Reform Judaism, which began in Germany in the early nineteenth century when progressive synagogues found they had interests in common and decided to cooperate. In the 1840s, rabbinical conferences brought the modernist rabbis together, and the movement spread to the United States. In 1885, the Pittsburgh Platform was agreed by the Reform movement, merging its German and American wings, as a formulation of principles that included acceptance of other religious perspectives, rejecting dietary restrictions, and discarding the idea of a Jewish nation in favour of that of a "religious community" [11]. The World Union for Progressive Judaism was founded in 1926. The Columbus Platform, agreed in 1937, adapted the principles of the movement to the mid-twentieth century, especially in responding to the persecution of Jews as a people and the threats to their survival [12]. Today, Reform Judaism has a recognized position together with the Orthodox and Conservative movements, allowing space for degrees of organized dissent and solidarity within the wider faith community.

There has been no shortage of individual Islamic modernists, of whom one of the first and most influential was Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), who sought as grand mufti of Egypt to reverse the inertia of his country's religious and cultural habits through introducing the values of the European Enlightenment–scientific enquiry, moral

development and education–while remaining committed to the Qur'an as the source of governmental legitimacy. He aimed at an alternative Islamic modernity to that disseminated from the West: Europe was an obstacle, because of its machinations in the Middle East, but also a conduit for progressive principles [13]. It has been argued by Ahmad Moussali that the reason why the trend set by Abduh, and the many intellectuals inspired by him, did not solidify into a movement is that "the Arab reform remained superficial and did not penetrate basic social fabrics. [It] blindly and unconditionally adopted Western thought and generalized its suitability to the Arab world". Hence the liberation movements of the twentieth century were linked to the very doctrines used to exercise and justify Western domination [14].

One of the most promising legacies of the twentieth century for Islamic reformism was that of the Sudanese religious leader Mahmud Muhammad Taha (1909–85), who set out to synthesize liberal socialist ideas with Sufi interpretations of Sharia, distinguishing the Qur'an's universal revelation, transmitted during the Prophet Muhammad's early period in Mecca, from the rigid legalism of the later Medinan chapters. Taha was executed for apostasy under the military regime of Jaafar Nimeiri. Since his death his ideas have become widely known among Muslim intellectuals; but Taha is far less well remembered than the founders of the more hard-line and well organized Muslim Brotherhood [15].

Current turmoil in the Middle East is driving thousands of disaffected young Muslims to sympathize with violent jihadis. There is a widespread consensus in the West that Islamic reformism should be encouraged–but how? Western-inspired initiatives, such as that embarked on briefly by the RAND Corporation in 2004, to intervene in the theology of another religion may have unintended consequences, one of which is that progressive *ulama* are exposed to allegations that they are tools of Western intelligence services [16]. To be successful, a reform movement would need not only a new generation of accredited individual Islamic opinion-formers but also decisive efforts at institution building [17].

Several successful Islamic overseas aid agencies have grown in Britain--encouraged by the Charity Commission and successfully surmounting the political and financial obstacles put in the way of Islamic charities since 11th September 2001, most notably by the US Government [18]. These NGOs demonstrate that Muslims in the West are fully capable of building autogenous institutions that harmonize and cooperate in practical ways with the non-Muslim mainstream, and make constructive use of media opportunities, while also being faithful to their own religious traditions: in this case, the strong injunctions to charitable giving that are found in the Qur'an. Islamic Relief Worldwide, the leading British Muslim overseas relief and development charity, was founded in Birmingham, England, by medical students in 1984 [19]. But there is no nationwide institution in Britain, or any other Western country, comparable to Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. This progressive religious network manages many thousands of educational, health and welfare institutions, and celebrated its centenary in 2012 with a conference where not only its achievements but also its internal ideological divisions were discussed with the utmost openness [20]. An affiliated women's organization, Aisyiyah, was founded as long ago as 1917. Muhammadiyah is marked by a high degree of internal democracy and administrative rationalization. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in Egypt in 1928, but later becoming a Pan-Arab network) it refrained from adopting a concerted oppositional stance. While Indonesia does have its own problems with violent Islamist extremism, it has escaped the hyper-politicization of all aspects of life which has held back human development in the Middle East, and which intrudes on the everyday life of Muslims in many places elsewhere.

The precedents of Islamic Relief Worldwide in Britain, and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, should inspire Muslims everywhere not only to think creatively about how to adapt their religious practices to modern exigencies, but also to crystallize their new thinking in durable institutions. A vast Muslim public must be hoping for the emergence of alternatives to that religious conservatism whose loyalties to the *umma* (or global Muslim "nation") the jihadis attempt to exploit. Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi attained his dominant influence not only by means of his seductive oratory, but through a lifetime of building up institutions in different spheres – academic, financial, judicial, educational and charitable – as well as his media profile. Yet though he is opposed to violent offensive jihadism and though he claims (as noted above) to occupy a middle ground, Qaradawi's rhetoric is essentially authoritarian [21]. A commitment to institution building as strong as his will be needed if reinterpretations of Islamic doctrine, more compatible than Qaradawi's with the spirit of free enquiry, are to compete effectively with the traditionalist views. The message should

be “Don’t agonize, organize” [22]. Determination and courage--sometimes physical as well as moral--will be needed to graduate from individual advocacy to the founding and expansion of new associations and media outlets; but the need and demand are certainly in place, and the reward could be epoch-making.

Efforts are indeed being made in the Islamic world to cultivate reformist institutions. Fetlullah Gülen, an Islamic intellectual and activist born in Turkey but now resident in Pennsylvania, has built up a major transnational movement including educational institutions and media resources [23]. It has encountered strong opposition in Turkey from both Islamic and secular political leaders. In September 2014, President Tayyip Erdogan accused the movement of setting up what he called a “parallel state” within the country, and asked the USA to deport him to Turkey for questioning [24]. Meanwhile, in July the senior Islamic cleric in Turkey, Sheikh Mehmet Görmez, convened a meeting in Istanbul of over one hundred “World Islamic Scholars for Peace, Moderation and Common Sense Initiative”, arguing in his opening speech that, rather than pin all the blame for violence in the Muslim world on others, “those who really have any sense of responsibility would care to look inside their own fold and make an analysis and come up with evaluations” [25]. Reportedly, Görmez attracted a large Iranian delegation, tapping into the Turkish traditions of Sunni and Shia coexistence by attracting Sufis from both sides; but two dominant Islamic nations, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, were not represented [26]. In March 2014, a rival 250-strong gathering was held in Abu Dhabi: the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, which led to the launch in July of the Muslim Council of Elders, presided over by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Egypt, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb. This consortium is critical of both Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood, favoring a “political Sufism” which is also promoted by the Zaytuna College based in California, and which has elicited a sympathetic response from some American foreign policy experts [27]. Added to this mix, the possibility that Saudi Arabia may find ways to liberalize Wahhabism, the rigorist form of Islam that legitimates the royal house and its aged leaders, tempted to retreat into a moneyed theological laager, is one of the unknowns whose outcome will shape the future of the religion worldwide.

So the challenge for Islamic reformers today is vastly more politically complicated than that which leaders of an ethno-religious minority responded to in the nineteenth century. But this surely makes the task all the more urgent.

References

[1] Michael Cook, Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic case in comparative perspective (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[2] See Jonathan Benthall, “Qaraḍāwī, Yūsuf al-”, The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. 2, 295–7.

[3] Abdelwahab Meddeb, Islam and its Discontents (London: William Heinemann, 2003).

[4] James Broucek, “Colonialism and the Muslim World”, The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. 1, 195–207.

[5] Akbar Ahmed, The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s war on terror became a global war on tribal Islam (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press), 2013.

[6] Cook, Ancient Religions, Modern Politics (2014).

[7] Jack Goody, Renaissances: The one or the many? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[8] “Building a knowledge society”, UNDP Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development, 2003, i.

[9] For a useful anthology of articles by reformist Muslim thinkers, see Mehran Kamrava, ed., The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity, A Reader (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Well-known contributors include Mohammed Arkoun, Fetlullah Gülen, Muhammad Shahrour, Nasr Abu Zaid, Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi.

[10] Dale Eickelman, "Inside the Islamic Reformation", Wilson Quarterly, 22.1 (Winter 1998), 80–9, available online. I asked Professor Eickelman recently whether he stood by his prediction, and he said yes, with emphasis on the "one day" and a possible timeframe of three or four decades from now.

[11] See: Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform.

Also Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971, vol.14, 213–27. The suggestion that Islamic institutions might emulate the example of nineteenth century Reform Judaism was advanced by Emanuel de Kadt at a seminar on religion and development at the University of Sussex in c. 2003. See his Assertive Religion: Religious intolerance in a multicultural world (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

[12] See: Reform Judaism: The Columbus Platform.

[13] Scott Morrison, "Abduh, Muḥammad", The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol.1, 9–14.

[14] Ahmad Moussalli, p.593, "Islamic Reform", The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol.1, 592–4.

[15] See Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the future of Shari'a (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2008); George Packer, "The moderate martyr: a radically peaceful vision of Islam", The New Yorker, 11 September 2006.

[16] See also Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: the politics of Islamic reformism", Public Culture, 18.2, 2006, 323–47.

[17] I have argued elsewhere that Tariq Ramadan, one of the best-known Islamic intellectuals in Europe and the USA, is committed less to Islamic reformism than to reconciling his loyalty to Islamic orthodoxy with the humanities as they are understood in the West (for instance, in his refusal to totally condemn stoning of women convicted of adultery in certain countries such as Nigeria, despite there being no authority for lapidation in the Qur'an). As importantly for the argument of the present article, Ramadan has shown no talent for institution building. "Splits at the seams", review of Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the new Middle East*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 October 2012, 24–25. (This review also defended Ramadan against unfair criticism and saluted his personal courage.)

[18] Cf. "Blocking Faith, Freezing Charity: Chilling Muslim charitable giving in the 'war on terrorism financing" (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 2009).

[19] Jonathan Benthall, "'Cultural proximity' and the conjuncture of Islam with modern humanitarianism", in Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism (ed. Michael Barnett and Janice Stein, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65–89. See also Jonathan Benthall, "Islamic Relief Worldwide", The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 605–6. An umbrella group, the Muslim Charities Forum, was founded in Britain in 2007:

[20] Muhammadiyah was founded by Ahmad Dahlan (1869–1923), under the influence of Egyptian religious reformers including Muhammad Abduh. See Claire-Marie Hefner, Report on International Research Conference on Muhammadiyah, Malang, Anthropology Today, 29:11, 2012, 27–28; Mitsuo Nakamura, The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town, c. 1910s–2010, 2nd edition (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

[21] See Jacob Høigilt, Islamist Rhetoric: Language and culture in contemporary Egypt (London: Routledge, 2011).

[22] The slogan is attributed to the American lawyer Florynce Kennedy (1916–2000), founder of the National Black

Feminist Organization.

[23] See M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, eds, Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

[24] World Bulletin, 19 September 2014.

[25] Republic of Turkey. Presidency of Religious Affairs,. World Islamic Scholars meet for peace. 17 July2014.

[26] Islam Affairs online magazine, 9 October 2014, "The scramble for religious authority",

[27] Islamopedia online, 5 September 2014.
Islam Affairs, 4 November 2014.
See also Zeyno Baram, "Understanding Sufism and its potential role in U.S. Policy", March 2004, World Organization for Resource Development and Education.

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