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Islam: At War With Itself

by
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Introduction

Recent months have seen a number of unexpected and extremely encouraging statements coming out of the Muslim world. Respected, mainstream Muslim leaders in a variety of countries have voiced opinions which are at odds with traditional, conservative Islam. They have challenged aspects of *shari'a* and are calling for a liberal, modernist, enlightened Islam compatible with Western norms. Perhaps the most significant of all is a comment by a group of British Muslims calling for an end to the apostasy law and for full freedom in all religious matters.

Since modernization first impacted the Muslim world following the imposition of secular laws and education systems by Western colonial empires, there have been tensions between Muslim conservatives and liberal intellectuals. Islamic traditionalists and Islamists have on the whole gained the dominant voice within Islam, especially since the Islamic resurgence which began in the 1970s and has swept all before it. These conservatives saw *shari'a* as divinely inspired and unchangeable, valid for all times and places, and they attacked the few liberal voices seeking to reinterpret the Muslim sources in line with modern contexts and human rights.

A small minority of marginalized Muslim progressives has been bravely defying traditional and Islamist pressures by reinterpreting Islam in a way compatible with modern concepts of secularity, individual human rights, religious freedom and gender equality.

However, recently some significant cracks seem to be forming within mainstream Islam. Important Muslim leaders are coming out against long-held traditional views and Wahhabi-Salafi doctrines and practices, instead openly supporting ideas compatible with modernity. The reformist teachings of Ahmad Khan (1817 – 1898) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849 -1905), which had been suppressed, are now resurfacing within mainstream Islam. As some experts on Islam have said, “the really decisive

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battle is taking place within Muslim civilization, where ultraconservatives compete against moderates and democrats for the soul of the Muslim public.”¹

Some examples:

Kuwaiti Women MPs refuse to wear *hijab*

Two Kuwaiti women Members of Parliament, among the first four women to be elected to Kuwait’s National Assembly in May 2009, have refused to wear the Islamic *hijab* (headscarf) in parliament. They demanded the annulment of an amendment to electoral regulations, introduced by Islamists, that enforces the observation of *shari’a* in parliament.²

Tantawi and the *niqab* at al-Azhar

During a recent tour of a Cairo secondary school, Sheikh Muhammad Tantawi, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar University in Cairo (the most important Sunni theological centre in the world), was angered by the sight of a girl wearing the *niqab* (the full veil which covers the face with only slits for the eyes). He instructed her to remove the *niqab*, saying “The *niqab* is a tradition; it has no connection with religion”. Ironically, the girl claimed to have worn the *niqab* in honor of his visit.³

Tantawi angrily told the girl that the *niqab* "has nothing to do with Islam and is only a custom" and ordered her to take it off. He also announced that he would soon issue a *fatwa* (formal order)

1 Robert W. Hefner, “September 11 and the Struggle for Islam”, in Craig Calhoun, Paul Price, and Ashley Timmer, eds., *Understanding September 11*, Project coordinated by the Social Science Research Council, New York: The New Press., 2002, pp. 41-52.

2 Richard Spencer, “Kuwaiti Women MPs Refuse to Wear Hijab in Parliament,” *Daily Telegraph*, October 12, 2009.

3 Adrian Blomfield, “Egypt Purges Niqab from Schools and Colleges,” *Daily Telegraph*, October 5, 2009.

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banning girls from entering al-Azhar institutions wearing the *niqab*. "*Niqab* has nothing to do with Islam, it is just a habit. I know more about religion than you and your parents," he told the student.⁴

Dr. Mahmoud Hamdi Zaraqouq, Egyptian Minister of Religious Affairs, went further than Tantawi, declaring his utter opposition to the *niqab*, stressing that "it is just a habit that has nothing to do with religion . . . *niqab* is an invention that has nothing to do with religion, for the religious men agree that the women's face and jaws are not improper [to show]."⁵

Imam condemns Church passivity in face of Muslim persecution of Christians⁶

In an interview with Premier Christian Radio earlier this year, Sheikh Dr. Muhammad al-Hussaini, founder of Scripture Reasoning and Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Leo Beck Rabbinical College, blamed the church hierarchy in the UK for not vociferously and actively protesting against Christian persecution around the world. Al-Hussaini specifically mentioned horrendous machete attacks on Christians in Nigeria, Iraqi Christians being burned out of their homes, and Christians in Pakistan being stoned or attacked on the slightest pretext.

While Muslims are hypersensitive to any ill treatment of Muslims anywhere in the world, he added, they remain silent about the persecution of Christians in their midst. Many Muslims are simply looking for scapegoats to punish for their own troubles. They know that churches in the West will not do more than utter a whimper, as this issue is not sufficiently important to them, mainly because those suffering are neither white nor wealthy, so can go on with impunity blaming Crusader-Zionist

4 "Sheikh al-Azhar Forces a Student to Remove Her Niqab," *Mideastwire* October 5, 2009, quoting *Al-Masry al-Yawm*; "Egypt's Top Cleric Plans Face Veil Ban in Schools," *Asharq Alawsat*, October 6, 2009.

5 "Sheikh al-Azhar: I'm not against Niqab and 80% of religious men..." *Mideastwire*, October 13, 2009 quoting *Al-Masry al-Yawm*.

6 "Imam Blames Christian Leaders for the Persecution of Christians," *Christian Concern for our Nation*, August 28, 2009, <http://www.ccfon.org/view.php?id=825>, accessed October 20, 2009.

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conspiracies for everything. Al-Hussaini called upon the church to be a voice for justice for persecuted minorities, which he claims would speak “into the heart of the Muslim community.”

“Contextualising Islam in Britain”⁷

This report, which has just been published, is the work of several prominent British Muslim academics and religious leaders. It has broken new ground in coming out with plain statements on key issues, avoiding the ambiguous statements customarily offered by mainline Muslim leaders. It calls for a Muslim worldview based not exclusively on jurisprudence but including Islamic philosophy (*falsafah*), theology (*kalam*) and literature (*adab*).

For Muslims living as a minority in a secular liberal democracy, applying *shari’a* is a matter of personal conscience and communal suasion rather than legal sanction, says the report. Muslims are not obliged to implement full *shari’a* against the wishes of their non-Muslim neighbors.⁸ *Shari’a* is not a detailed code of things forbidden and permitted but an ethical system of moral and spiritual education. There are commonalities between the underlying objectives (*maqasid*) of *shari’a* and human rights declarations.

The paper opposes the traditional view of divine sovereignty only implemented in an Islamic state under *shari’a*. It states that this system engenders a lack of democratic checks and balance, a lack of accountability and may lead to tyranny. An Islamic state is not necessary for Islam to thrive and be practiced. Secular democracy as practiced in Britain is legitimate because it holds power to account and upholds fundamental freedoms and non-interference in the religious lives of its citizens.

⁷ *Contextualising Islam in Britain: Exploratory Perspectives*, University of Cambridge in Association with the Universities of Exeter and Westminster, Centre of Islamic Studies: Cambridge, October 2009.

⁸ *Contextualising Islam in Britain: Exploratory Perspectives*, pp. 10-11. All subsequent quotes in this section are taken from this report.

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British Muslims, say the authors, are perfectly happy with the British form of procedural secularism (in contrast to ideological secularism) and support its accommodative tradition. The separation of religion from the state and the principle of non-discrimination by the state between religions guarantee freedom and equality for all, giving Muslims the freedom to practice Islam without interference in an atmosphere of respect, security and dignity.

The authors clearly oppose the concepts of *takfir*⁹ and *al-wala' wal-bara'*¹⁰ which differentiate sharply between perceived true believers and all others, demanding hostility and enmity. Distinctions between believers and non-believers are important only in matters of doctrine and worship, they argue, not in matters of social interaction or in seeking the common good of society. In these matters it is important to have friendly relationships with non-Muslims, to treat them as equals, and to focus on commonalities and shared values. The paper states that Islam teaches the equality of all humans regardless of gender and that it forbids forced marriages, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and honor killings. Muslims should campaign against injustices and oppression inflicted by Muslims on other Muslims and on non-Muslims.

On suicide terrorism and bombings they state that there are many ways to oppose oppression other than fighting (*jihad*). These include lobbying, activism, and writing. Foreign conflicts cannot justify violence in Britain. They add that “Islam is opposed to all forms of terrorism, regardless of who sponsors them . . . Both suicide and suicide bombings are absolutely forbidden (*haram*) in Islam as is the killing of innocent people.”

⁹ *Takfir* – the process of declaring someone to be an apostate from Islam, a process which has been revived by radical contemporary jihadi groups.

¹⁰ *Al-wala' wal bara'* - “Friendship and Distinguishing” - a doctrine applied by radical groups to differentiate and separate between real and false Muslims. True Islam is defined by a love for Muslims and a hatred for non-Muslims.

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The authors adopt the modern Christian principle of differentiating between religious sin and state legislated crime. Thus on apostasy they explain that Islam dislikes apostasy but prohibits discrimination against apostates, adding: “It is important to say quite simply that people have the freedom to enter the Islamic faith and the freedom to leave it.” Similarly on homosexuality they state that the Qur’an forbids both the practice of homosexual acts, and discrimination against homosexuals.

The declaration on apostasy is especially important because it clearly goes against the *shari’a* law of apostasy, accepted by all Islamic schools of law, which lays down a death sentence for those who leave Islam. The authors explain that in early Islam apostasy was conflated with treason in times of war. It was treason that merited the death penalty, not the apostasy. Therefore today “there is no compulsion and people cannot be coerced into a religious commitment.” Other Muslim leaders dealing with apostasy had not dared question the validity of the classical apostasy law, but had either asked for the repentance phase (usually 3 days) to be lengthened indefinitely (for example, Ali Gomaa, Chief Mufti of Egypt) or for a moratorium until the time was deemed ripe for the full implementation of *shari’a* (for example, Tariq Ramadan).

Analysis

There is now a powerful struggle going on for the soul of Islam. It would seem that under the combined pressure of extremist Islamist terrorism, the “war on terror” and the dangers to Muslim regimes and societies, new voices are emerging within mainstream Islamic leadership embracing a new *ijtihad*¹¹ compatible with modernity and human rights. They would seem to accept the liberal reformist view of prioritizing the core values of Islam, distilled from the Islamic source texts, as spiritual and moral norms that override literalist, coercive, political and social interpretations. They seem to be willing to ignore traditional Islamic concepts that contradict modern humanistic values of pluralism, freedom and equality.

¹¹ *Ijtihad* – the process of individual effort by a jurist at logical deduction on a legal question, using the Qur’an and *hadith* as sources. *Ijtihad* allows fresh interpretations made from the two sources.

Conclusion

France has forbidden the wearing of the *hijab* in public places and recently its highest constitutional authority, the Constitutional Council, has refused the introduction of Islamic finance on the grounds that a secular state must not allow principles of *shari'a* to be recognized in its legislation.¹² In contrast, the governments of the USA and of the UK have consistently sided with the more repressive, conservative and traditional sections within their Muslim communities, apparently hoping to placate, accommodate and appease them by accepting their demands for *shari'a* implementation in multiple spheres. At the same time they have ignored the more progressive and liberal voices in the Muslim community implying that they are too weak and marginal to be viable interlocutors to governments.

Arab liberals have criticized President Obama's tendency to endorse conservative and radical forms of Islam while ignoring liberal Muslim trends. A Yemeni liberal journalist accused Obama of appointing Muslim advisors who do not represent the diversity of Muslim opinion and who want to implement oppressive *shari'a* rules.¹³ Others have criticized Obama's overtures to the Taliban and Iran as strengthening the radicals and weakening the reformists and liberals.¹⁴

¹² "France Court Quashes Islamic Finance Measure," *Al-Arabiya News Channel*, October 15, 2009.

¹³ "Yemeni Liberal Criticizes Appointment of Dalia Mogahed as Obama's Advisor on Islam," *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, No. 2518, September 4, 2009.

¹⁴ "Criticism in the Arab Press of the US Administration's Initiative to Reach Out to 'Moderates in the Taliban'," *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, No. 2353, May 12, 2009; "Arab Liberals Eight Years After 9-11: Obama's Overtures Towards Iran, Extremists Seen as a Sign of Weakness," *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis*, No. 551, September 29, 2009.

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A similar trend is visible in liberal and mainline Christian denominations whose leaders prefer to deal with Islamic traditionalists and hardliners in interfaith dialogue while ignoring the liberal reformist voices emerging within Islam.

It is time Western governments and Christian Churches implemented a policy of rejecting traditional Muslim and Islamist demands and that they shifted to a position of active support for the new voices of reason and moderation within Islam. The courageous Muslims advocating these reforms deserve our full support and encouragement.

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