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What Does Progressive Islam Look Like?

PETER MANDAVILLE

In recent years considerable attention has been paid in modern Islamic studies to the emergence of new Muslim intellectuals seeking to reformulate and reinvigorate elements of tradition and to open new avenues of inquiry to solve contemporary Muslim problems. This phenomenon has been seen, variously, as an 'Islamic reformation', 'Islamic modernism', 'progressive Islam', and 'liberal Islam', to cite but a few of the standard appellations currently in use. It has most frequently been associated with figures such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Fatima Mernissi, Nurcholish Madjid, Amina Wadud, Ali Bulac, Abdullahi an-Na'im, Khaled Abu el-Fadl, and Farid Esack – again, to name but a few. These writers have all undoubtedly made hugely important contributions to contemporary Muslim thought. It has, however, been extremely difficult to gauge the influence and impact of their ideas within the wider Muslim world. To a large extent, this is a problem of language – both linguistic and discursive. The majority of those associated with this trend tend towards an academic discourse which limits their readership to only the most highly educated. In a number of cases, key works have not been translated into Muslim languages, or face distribution problems and/or political barriers to wider dissemination. In short –

rather in gaining an understanding of how the general tendencies of this reformist impulse circulate in the daily practice of Muslim masses at the grassroots level. Without detracting from the originality of much reformist thought today, it can be argued that a great many of these writers are representative – rather than exclusively generative – of ideas that already permeate Muslim communities. Contrary to popular images of Muslim culture as stagnant and backward-looking, much evidence suggests that the pragmatism which characterizes '(trans)local knowledge' – to mix a Geertzian standard bearer with a dose of Ap-padurai – leads many Muslims to engage in a critical reformulation of tradition as part and parcel of adapting to life in a complex, globalizing world.

At the outset we should note, of course, that it would be a severe misrepresentation to claim that all the work done to date under the rubric of progressive Islam has been confined to the realm of academic discourse. A number of feminist writers, in particular, have very profitably combined innovative textual work with social activism in ways that usefully illustrate the mutual constitution of theory and practice (Amina Wadud is an important example in this regard). We could also point to the important human rights and social change advocacy work undertaken by Abdullahi an-Na'im in recent years. Likewise, it would do extreme injustice to the work of many associated with this movement not to recognize that their intellectual contributions have often been inspired by – or served as the necessary solutions to – very particular dilemmas and real world problems, some of which have had tragic personal consequences for those involved. There are indeed important linkages between Muslim intellectualism and social activism today. The aim here is thus not to critique the more intellectual dimensions of progressive Islam, but rather to argue a case for expanding the research agenda. There could be no better complement to the philosophical and conceptual contributions in this area than to be able to show that much of what is often described in specialized (and sometimes less accessible) academic language actually permeates the level of everyday practice right across the Muslim world. There are already a number of writers whose work helps to point us in the right direction – I think particularly of John Bowen's *Muslims through Discourse*, and also the various titles in Princeton's 'Studies in Muslim Politics' series.

Reimagining boundaries

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, however, there are new imperatives in the field of progressive or pluralist Islam. Much popular discourse has, unfortunately, once again come to focus on issues of intolerance and violence in Islam. Muslim voices and analysts of Islam have found themselves on the defensive, constantly challenged and required to provide evidence for the existence of 'moderate Muslims' (as if Muslimness in and of itself somehow connotes immoderation). In this climate, pointing to the Abdolkarim Soroushes and Muhammad Shahrurs – however important their work may be – is not enough. The selective and limited appeal of such authors masks the extent to which Muslim settings far removed from the influence of academic discourse are today nevertheless experiencing a dynamic, pluralistic engagement with tradition. Likewise, it is worrying and dangerous that certain severely myopic madrasas in South Asia should be perceived as representative of general global trends in Islamic education. There exist countless other sites of knowledge production and dissemination in the Muslim world, many of which are contributing to a popular reimagining of Islam's normative boundaries. The remainder of this article



An Indonesian human rights activist during a demonstration in Jakarta.

and without seeking to belittle the crucial and in some cases revolutionary contributions that these writers have made – it could be argued that contemporary reformist Islam has become too closely associated with a narrow group of 'superstar' intellectuals.

There have been those who cite this fact as evidence that reformist Islam actually has very little in the way of a Muslim audience today, or that European and North American academics celebrate these figures because they conform to a Western normative ideal that has very little basis in the reality of contemporary Muslim culture. Contrary to this latter position, it will be the contention of this article that progressive Islam is indeed alive and well (and, more importantly, growing) in the wider Muslim world, but that its future lies not, or not only, in promoting an ever-proliferating roster of innovative hermeneuticians – but

will hence be devoted to identifying and suggesting possible routes and lines of inquiry that may allow the pluralism of contemporary Muslim practice to move more clearly to the foreground of today's work on progressive Islam. Again, it is not being suggested that the intellectual dimension of this project be abandoned or even reduced in priority, only that bridges to the world of progressive practice should attract equal attention and have greater prominence within the field than is currently the case. We should also of course be attendant to the fact that the very notion of 'progressive Islam' represents an epistemological and normative quagmire. There is not the scope here to engage thoroughly with these latter questions, and it will be assumed for the sake of argument that we can identify today something like an emerging tradition of critical or progressive Islam even if we are not always comfortable with such labels.

Being Muslim in Europe

Islam in Europe is perhaps one of the richest contexts in which these themes might be explored. While the intellectual contributions of a figure such as Tariq Ramadan – particularly his highly influential 1998 book *To Be a European Muslim* – are well known, less attention has been paid to attempts in recent years to put the ethos of civic engagement that is central to this project into practice. What do Muslim audiences, especially the younger generation that forms his core constituency, do with Ramadan's ideas? Some of the most innovative efforts in this regard can be seen by shifting the lens with which we view Islam in Europe from the national to the wider European level. The tendency in the literature thus far has been to produce rather atomized studies of Islam in specific European countries. This work has undoubtedly been of immense value. There is, however, a growing tendency among many young Muslims in Europe to reach beyond the confines of national boundaries in their networking efforts. There is a sense in which the future of Islam in Europe is tied to the larger fate of Europe as a post-national project. The lived experience of being Muslim in Europe is one of negotiating plural affiliations and allegiances to multiple traditions – an endeavour that resonates with the European ideal of a citizenry grounded less in territorial identity, but committed instead to a wider normative vision. Interestingly enough, one may describe the notion of the *ummah* in very much the same terms. There exist today institutions that embody this new trend, perhaps none more so than the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO), founded in 1996 to provide a social context in which various national Muslim youth organizations might come together in order to discuss and act on matters of common interest. The Forum has in recent years established itself as a credible voice and resource for the next generation of European Muslims, and has formed valuable linkages with institutions such as the European Parliament. Insofar as one of the key challenges facing the generational transition within European Islam has been the question of a successful move from the insularity and 'ghettoization' that characterized the first generation of Muslim immigrants to a culture of public engagement and political participation on the part today's young European Muslims, groups such as FEMYSO indicate some important paths towards the practical implementation of something like a 'European Islam'.

Everyday practice in Southeast Asia

Another context in which the project of progressive Islam has long been tied to everyday practice is Southeast Asia. The history and experience of Islam in this region has been one of syncretism and hybridity – resulting, it could be argued, in an intrinsic predisposition towards religious pluralism. Western policymaking circles have, unfortunately, tended to focus on the minority of radical movements in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in the wake of 11 September and the Bali bombing of October 2002. This approach threatens to eclipse the fact that Southeast Asia is actually the major Muslim world region most likely to provide, in the long run, a model of critical Islamic practice that accommodates emerging global norms while preserving and reformulating crucial aspects of Islamic tradition. It is telling that some of the region's intellectual luminaries – such as Malaysia's Chandra Muzaffar and Farish Noor – are also heavily involved in practical human rights work. Turning to Indonesia, the innovative work of figures such as Nurcholish Madjid and the late Harun Nasution have found continuity in the various research institutions associated with the IAIN network (recently consolidated into a National Islamic University). Numerous

Muslim NGOs have emerged in the wake of Suharto's fall from power, and are beginning to solidify the strands of an increasingly important civil societal layer in Indonesia. Out of the network of *pondok pesantren* religious schools, for example, have emerged in recent years social movements that take the lead in progressive social agendas such as women's reproductive health and rights, and this from a sector generally viewed as 'traditional' and disengaged from mainstream social issues. To be sure, there are plenty of *pesantren* that conform to the more detached, unworldly model (or whose real world engagements lead to more malignant agendas). Yet it would be worrisome if, throwing out the baby with the bathwater, we were to ignore the ways in which in some cases the grassrootedness of such institutions allows for the mobilization of social capital to much more progressive ends.

Aside from the various national and regional contexts of Europe and Southeast Asia cited above, it is increasingly important today to appreciate the transnational and global dimensions of efforts towards a progressive Islam. While much of the coverage of transnational Islam has tended to focus on terrorist networks and various 'Wahhabi' linkages of late, we are missing much if we do not also take into consideration global Muslim activity of a rather different nature. From the Progressive Muslims Network organized out of South Africa by Farid Esack to the phenomenal transnational circulation of work by the Qatari-based Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, it is evident that Muslim thinkers who engage more dynamically with tradition undoubtedly possess a growing global audience. And, again, it is not only isolated intellectual figures or narrowly subscribed specialist groups at work in this vital international context. Transnational progressive Islam has a vital practical face, too. In the work of groups such as Women Living under Muslim Law, we find a critical orientation toward traditional legal knowledge on gender issues transformed into a transnational solidarity movement connecting women in several dozen countries. And in the case of Turkey's Gülen movement, to cite another example, we find elements of Sufi spirituality fused with socio-economic liberalism in a highly successful transnational educational project. Dozens of Gülen-sponsored schools, emphasizing a modernist curriculum against a backdrop of 'non-invasive' Islamic morality, now operate throughout much of the Balkans and Central Asia.

The preceding examples represent only a few avenues for the potential exploration of how the intellectual dimensions of progressive Islam are taking root in the realm of social practice. To be sure, much important work in this direction is already being undertaken by numerous doctoral students and recently graduated Ph.D.s. Meena Sharify-Funk in the United States, for example, is looking at the critical hermeneutics of classical and modern Muslim philosophers within the context of transnational women's movements. Ermete Mariani in France is researching the global political economy behind the diffusion of Sheikh Qaradawi's ideas, and Bekim Agai in Germany has interpreted the Gülen project as a reformulation of Islamism into a new ethics of education. The comparative ethnography of progressive Islam – that is, the appreciation of contemporary reformist thought as embodied in the pragmatics of everyday Muslim life – is the vital next step for the study of Islam in the modern world. A new attention to the social locatedness of critical Islamic practice will produce a far more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of a phenomenon heretofore seen as confined to a largely self-referential circle of intellectual élites. The social reality of progressive Islam is far more diverse and significantly wider in scope.

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