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Kurzman, C.

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Book presentation
CHARLES KURZMAN

Liberal Islam
Not a Contradiction in Terms

Many Westerners, and many Muslims, consider 'Liberal Islam' to be a contradiction in terms. This is not the case. The term 'liberal' has negative connotations in much of the Islamic world, in part because of the hypocrisy of its introduction to the region by colonialists and imperialists who flouted the liberalism they touted. Yet the Islamic world is witnessing a thriving movement of Muslim thinkers who address 'liberal' concerns such as democracy, the separation of Church and State, the rights of women, the rights of minorities, freedom of thought, and the idea of human progress – hardly the only concerns that might be labeled 'liberal', but bedrock themes in the liberal tradition.

While liberal Islam shares parallel concerns with Western liberalism, it is no mere echo of the West. Both traditions may support freedom of thought, for example, but they do so within different discourses. As I have tried to demonstrate in my recent anthology, *Liberal Islam: A Source-Book* (Oxford University Press, 1998), the Islamic discourse has generated three tropes, or meta-narratives, through which liberal concerns are expressed.

The 'Liberal *Shari^ca*'

The 'liberal *shari^ca*' trope argues that the revelations of the Qur'an and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad – the body of Islamic guidance and precedence handed down from 7th century Arabia – *command* us to follow liberal positions. For example, in the case of freedom of thought, some 'liberal *shari^ca*' arguments take verses from the Qur'an that urge the believers to think independently. ^cAli Shari^cati (Iran, 1933-77), for example, draws on the Qur'anic distinction between *bashar* (the human animal) and *insan* (the fully human being): 'Humankind is a chooser, that is, the only being who is not only capable of revolting against nature and the order which is ruling over it, but can revolt against its own natural, physical, and psychological needs. Humans can choose things which have neither been imposed on them by nature, nor is their body fit to choose them. This is the most sublime aspect of humanity.' Similarly, Abdelwahab El-Affendi (Sudan, born 1955) argues that all humans must be endowed with free will and the 'freedom to sin', or they will also lack 'the freedom to be virtuous.'

Other 'liberal *shari^ca*' defences of freedom of thought draw on the right to conduct *ijtihad*, or Islamic interpretation. This was one of the rallying cries of the modernist Islamic movement of the 19th century, as exemplified by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (born in Iran, 1838-97): 'In their beliefs they [the members of each community] must shun submission to conjectures and not be content with mere imitation of their ancestors. For if man believes in things without proof or reason, makes a practice of following unproven opinions, and is satisfied to imitate and follow his ancestors, his mind inevitably desists from intellectual movement, and little by little stupidity and imbecility overcome him – until his mind becomes completely idle and he becomes unable to perceive his own good and evil; and adversity and misfortune overtake him from all sides.' Similarly, Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Egypt-Qatar, born 1926) urges those who wish to impose strict interpretations of Islamic law to recognize that those 'who hold different views or approaches are also capable of *ijtihad* like themselves.'

Indeed, Ghulam Ahmad Parwez (India-Pakistan, born 1903) has argued that the Qur'an's protection of individual freedom is so strong that it overrides all forms of authority: 'No person has the right to compel any other person to obey his orders: 'It is not [possible] for any human being unto whom God has given the Scripture and wisdom and prophethood that

he should afterward have said unto mankind: "Be slaves of me instead of God" (Sura 3, Verse 79).' Political systems that do allow individual freedom of thought, according to this trope, are un-Islamic.

The 'Silent *Shari^ca*'

A second trope of liberal Islam I call the 'silent *shari^ca*'. In this trope, freedom, for example, is not *required* by the *shari^ca*, but it is *allowed* by the *shari^ca*. This trope argues that the *shari^ca* is silent on certain topics – not because the divine revelation was incomplete or faulty, but because the revelation *intentionally* left certain issues for humans to choose. Sa^cid Ramadan of Egypt, for example, has written that 'the *shari^ca* of God, as embodied in Qur'an and sunna, does not bind mankind in *mu^camalat* (worldly dealings) except by providing a few broad principles of guidance and a limited number of injunctions. The *shari^ca* only rarely concerns itself with details. The confinement of the *shari^ca* to broad principles and its silence in other spheres are due to divine wisdom and mercy. The fact that the *shari^ca* is silent on these points – and we should bear in mind that, as the Qur'an remarks, "God is not forgetful" – means only that the application of the general injunctions of the *shari^ca* to the multifarious details of human life, and the confrontation of new problems according to the dictates of *maslaha* (public good) have been left to the discretion of the body of conscious Muslims.'

Within this general argument, definitions of the public good may vary. Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia, born 1939) phrases the public good in terms of intellectual progress: 'We must have a firm conviction that all ideas and forms of thought, however strange they may sound, should be accorded means of expression. It is by no means rare that such ideas and thoughts, initially regarded as generally wrong, are [later] found to be right. Furthermore, in the confrontation of ideas and thoughts, even error can be of considerable benefit, because it will induce truth to express itself and grow as a strong force. Perhaps it was not entirely small talk when our Prophet said that differences of opinion among his *umma* [community] were a mercy [from God].' Laith Kubba (Iraq-England, born 1954) phrases the public good in terms of economic progress: 'As Muslims devise strategies for economic growth in a competitive world and redefine their priorities, their outlook will shift from the abstract concepts and values of Islam to the realities of the Muslim world. They will continue to turn to Islam as a source of personal and communal identity and moral guidance, but they will also critically assess the legacy handed down by previous generations who may have narrowed Islam in ways that had less to do with the essence of the faith than with historical accidents and parochial circumstances.' In both of these examples, the *shari^ca* allows Muslims freedom of thought in order to attain these public goods.

The 'Interpreted *Shari^ca*'

The first trope of liberal Islam holds that the *shari^ca* requires liberty, and the second trope holds that the *shari^ca* allows liberty. But there is a third liberal Islamic trope that takes issue

with each of the first two. This I call the 'interpreted *shari^ca*'. According to this view, 'Religion is divine, but its interpretation is thoroughly human and this-worldly.' I quote here from ^cAbdul-Karim Soroush (Iran, born 1945): 'the text does not stand alone, it does not carry its own meaning on its shoulders, it needs to be situated in a context, it is theory-laden, its interpretation is in flux, and presuppositions are as actively at work here as elsewhere in the field of understanding. Religious texts are no exception. Therefore their interpretation is subject to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions inquiring them… We look at revelation in the mirror of interpretation, much as a devout scientist looks at creation in the mirror of nature … [so that] the way for religious democracy and the transcendental unity of religions, which are predicated on religious pluralism, will have been paved.'

Similarly, Hassan Hanafi (Egypt, born 1935) has written: 'There is no one interpretation of a text, but there are many interpretations given the difference in understanding between different interpreters. An interpretation of a text is essentially pluralistic. The text is only a vehicle for human interests and even passions. The conflict of interpretation is essentially a socio-political conflict, not a theoretical one. Theory indeed is only an epistemological cover-up. Each interpretation expresses the socio-political commitment of the interpreter.'

Syed Vahiduddin (India, born 1909) said: 'But as the Qur'an's vision of God cannot be confined exclusively to any one of its historical expressions, religion itself cannot be a static construct made once and for all without revealing fresh nuances in its historical development. This static concept of religion neglects the truth that at no point of history can all possibilities be exhausted, though a given point in history might be pregnant with implications for the future. History is a process of creative expression; not a perpetual repetition, and hence it is presumptuous to limit Islam to its classical expression.'

Challenges of Liberal Islam

Liberal Islam is thriving, propelled by rising education in the Islamic world and the global wave of democratization. Yet it has enemies. On one hand, Muslim opponents accuse it of being overly Westernized, of abandoning the core values and traditions of Islam. Liberal Islam, one Muslim scholar wrote me, is the work of Muslims who 'want to do nothing more than fade into the Judaeo-Christian woodwork.' Another Muslim scholar, Gai Eaton, has referred to liberals as 'Uncle Toms' (a derisive term used by African-Americans to describe a black person who is grotesquely servile to whites). The force of these critiques echoes debates of the early 20th century, when a traditionalist Muslim scholar called modernist Islamic thinkers 'stupid' and 'manipulated by Satan'.

On the other hand, many Westerners consider liberal Islam to be overly Islamic. Leonard Binder's *Islamic Liberalism* argues that liberal positions grounded on 'explicit Islamic legislation of divine origin' – what I call the 'liberal

shari^ca' trope – constitute an impossible 'anomaly' (p. 244). One wonders whether liberalism based on Christian scripture would be considered similarly anomalous. Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* makes no distinction between liberal and non-liberal Muslims – they are all in the 'other' camp. Similarly, a cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine in early 1998 showed a caricature of Iranian President Muhammad Khatami saying, 'We are interested in a cultural exchange. We will give you one of our writers, and you will give us Salman Rushdie' – this despite Khatami's support for rule of law in Iran and his opposition to the groups seeking Rushdie's execution.

Liberal Islam thus faces hostility on two fronts, both of which treat it as a contradiction in terms: Muslims who consider it not properly Islamic and Westerners who consider it not properly liberal. Liberal Islam is caught in the crossfire, as the party of war on both sides joins in tacit collusion against those seeking to build bridges in between.

Is this not the same dilemma in which the field of Islamic Studies finds itself? ◆

Dr Charles Kurzman is Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA. He is author of Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook. (See page 43).
E-mail: kurzman@unc.edu