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A Question of Concern? A Rhetoric of Crisis

SANA MAKHOLOUF

It is perhaps not surprising that the chorus of voices bemoaning recent developments among Muslim peoples has been growing in strength. What is surprising, however, is how many of these concerns have been conflated and expressed in a single question, repeated like a magic mantra: “what went wrong?” Indeed, the same question seems to have been asked for so long by observers of Islam and the Middle East that its validity is not often seriously doubted. Thus, when Bernard Lewis published his *What Went Wrong with Islam?* shortly after the events of September 2001, few people wondered about the adequacy of the question to assess the causes of these events. Rather, where there was opposition and criticism, it referred to the answers Lewis proposed, never to the question itself. In a sense, one might say, the “historical events” themselves arose only in order to confirm the validity of the question.

Introducing the question

Intrigued by the power of conviction that carries this way of thinking, and wondering how the problems of Muslims and “Islam” are really served by it, I suggest that we turn the tables round to ask (and ask with urgency): what really happens when the question “What went wrong

with Islam?” is asked? Wherein lies the attraction of the simple (and simplistic) line of thinking that runs: something is not right, but it used to be right, so something must have gone wrong, yet if something went wrong, what was it?

A further look at the (long) history of the question and at those who ask it reveals that this expression of concern is not solely found in Western (and Westernized) eyes, but is equally central to both the Islamic Renaissance, heralded in the works of the late nineteenth century Arab reformers, and to the rhetoric of contemporary Islamists.

One of the first times the question “what went wrong with Islam?” was asked was in the semi-biographical novel, *Ummu 'l-Qura: Proceedings of the first Conference on Islamic Renaissance 1316 H* (1899), by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1855–1902). Al Kawakibi was a young Syrian journalist who joined the circle of the architects of Salafism led by Muhammad 'Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, after secretly moving to Cairo in 1899. The novel, written and narrated under the pseudonym of al-Sayyid al-Furati, was presented to Khedive Abbas II, who approved its publication and extended his patronage to al-Kawakibi.¹ Though better known for his influential work, *Taba' al-istibdad* [The Nature of Despotism], it is *Ummu 'l-Qurra* that can be seen as one of the earliest examples of what would later emerge as a particular and recognizable type of discourse: the rhetoric of an Islamism that feeds (symbolically) on the question of “what went wrong?”

Al-Furati records the secret meetings of the Society of Mecca, which uses the hajj season as a cover for its clandestine activities. He leads representatives of Muslim communities, *Ikhwan al-tawhid*, in discussions around the most pertinent question of their day: “What went wrong with Muslims?” Though it is striking to which extent the organization mirrored the “Western” model of conferences, with the

The morally laden question “What went wrong with Islam” is usually associated with Bernard Lewis and has gained seeming relevance in the wake of 9/11. Interestingly however, the question has a fairly long tradition in the Muslim world as well. This article dissects the question’s rhetorical qualities through a discussion of its invocation by late nineteenth century Arab reformers. The analysis reveals that, both then and now, asking the question functions to preclude further inquiries, to silence disagreeing voices, and to strategically boost the agendas of the questioner.

appointment of a chair, secretary, committees, etc., the Ikhwan never doubt the religious and cultural authenticity of their enterprise.

They embark on this endeavour with a sense of history in the making. The moment is now ripe, al-Kawakibi claims, to change the tide in favour of the Muslim nations. He heralds the rise of a “vanguard of free and noble men” which will wake the ummah from its slumber.² His Ikhwan profess allegiance to the forthcoming *jihad* and vow secrecy to the brotherhood. Their war cry, “Zealous

guardianship of religion over compassion for Muslims,”³ indicates the beginning of a rift that will henceforth ever widen: the rift between loyalty for Islam and loyalty to Muslims.

Looking in from the outside

Each speaker offers in turn his analysis of what ails the ummah, trying to locate within its traditional structures the sources of the infection. Curiously, none stops to question the validity of the diagnosis itself: the lowliness of the Muslims is all too evident. They all agree that the decline started “more than a 1000 years ago” when the Arab Umayyad dynasty lost its powers to “non-Arab elements.” However, after Western nations had reversed their fortunes (through their “successful” Reformation and Enlightenment) and gained the upper hand over the Muslims, the latter’s decline has become discernable. Thus, the regression that supposedly had begun long ago and had made its way largely unnoticed could now be identified precisely because of being able to be seen from the “outside.” And the question of “what went wrong?” could be asked, and more importantly, answered by those who were willing and daring to step “out.” By so doing these concerned activists would leave behind their “inherited means of comprehension” and do for Islam what “Luther and Voltaire had done for the West.”⁴

The extent to which this vision from “the outside” is taken to be the model for the comprehension of Islam’s ailments and for the choice of their remedies, appears clearly when Al-Kawakibi reports a meeting between the Mufti of Kazan and a newly converted Russian Muslim Orientalist. Their cross-cultural dialogue shows that Orientalism can serve not only to expose the inadequacy of the traditional ulama but also to celebrate, by contrast, the virtues of the original Islam as rediscovered by the scientific tools of western scholarship. Al-Kawakibi is totally unfazed by the irony that a non-Arab West would be partner to an Arab-centred Muslim awakening.

The combined efforts of the Ikhwan and the Orientalists centres on one “urgent” finding: what must be resisted by all means is the claim of the Ottomans to be the legitimate representatives of the Caliphate and sovereigns over the Arabian Peninsula. In order to remove them from their position at the head of the umma a formulation is needed to effectively keep them out of the fold of Islam. According to al-Kawakibi and his circle, such a formulation must be both theological and political at the same time. The Ikhwan find the required justification of their aims in the reformist Wahhabi theology, which excludes Muslims who do not adhere to their particular doctrine from the faith altogether and grants legitimacy to the fight against them. Accordingly, the Ikhwan hold that it is only the Arab *muwahiddun* (i.e. the Wahhabis), from the “heartland” of Islam, who preserve the religion from the corrupting forces that had assailed the rest of the Muslim world and which have allowed it to return again to a benighted state of *jahiliya* (ignorance).⁵ These Arabs, with their “salafi” orientation, Arabic language proficiency, “pure racial stock,” “tribal solidarity,” “aversion to frivolous intellectualism,” and rejection of

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“exotic forms of Islam like Sufism,” represent the “most authentic” version of Islam, *al-Islamiyyah*. “The religion has originated from amongst them and in their tongue,” al-Kawakibi argues, “they are its people, carriers, protectors, and its defenders, [...] we should not feel reluctant to give in to their superior understanding of their religion” and join them in thwarting the threat to the “heart” of Islamdom.⁶

Best jihad: Silencing the tradition

Whatever the particular form this “threat” to the heart of Islam, be it foreign Islam (non-Arab Muslims), false Islam (Sufism), or dead Islam (traditional ulama), they are all identified by the same name-tag, namely, as “causes of what went wrong” and therefore, as figures of “resistance to modernization.”⁷ Consequently, the main culprits are the representatives of “traditional” (pre-modern) Islam, irrespective of their particular origin. Moreover, the term “traditional” was not so much the result of an in-depth analysis of religion as a foil for political action. Correspondingly, the causes for “backwardness” and, thus, the targets of reform, were located in the traditional institutions and repositories of knowledge that had for centuries informed and shaped the pluralistic diversity of the Islamic self. Namely, they targeted the ulama and jurists, keepers of the “outward” knowledge of the law, and the sufis, keepers of the “inward” knowledge of the heart. All of these had to be changed, silenced, or sacrificed in the relentless march toward reform.

In response to the inner evils of Islam so perceived, the Ikhwan al-Tawhid commit themselves to jihad against the enemies of true Islam hoping, thereby, to regain the former glory and power of their “pure” Arabian heritage. Accordingly, they declare that the *best* jihad for the times consists in humiliating the “hypocrite” ulama.⁸

In cooperation with the institutions provided by the nation state, the Ikhwan propose to use all rhetorical, political, and educational means to wage the battle against the existing institutions of the ulama and sufi tariqas and help to monitor their activities and public functions. One of their recommendations is to place “dissenting” ulama “under quarantine,” if they were to teach, give fatwa or counsel outside of the official line. Reformed ulamas would then help educate the commoners in the basics of *tawhid* and zealously guard public morality. Sufis would be persuaded to return to orthodoxy and guide their disciples to gainful employment. Reformed orders would provide social networks to serve the community and carry on roles of civic philanthropy like running orphanages and social services.

Under the auspices of Khedive Abbas II, identified as the best candidate for leading the reawakened ummah, the Society of Ummu'l-Qurra—a modern elite composed of intellectuals, politicians, activists—would help establish Arab dominance over a Muslim Reformation free of *shirk* (idolatry) and *bid'a* (innovation) based on a return to the unadulterated sources: the Quran, and a “cleansed” corpus of authenticated hadith. The doors of *ijtihad*, now declared open, would yield rationally controlled pragmatic rulings that could be easily codified. Only this time around, *ijtihad* would not be left to the specialized *faqih*s but rather handed over to the intellectuals to reinterpret and reformulate Islamic normativity while at the same time dismantling the classical representations of Islamic law.

Many of these recommendations materialized within a short span after the publication of the novel. Khedive Abbas, under the influence of Lord Cromer, the British Resident, appointed Muhammad 'Abduh in 1899 to the position of Mufti, the highest judicial post of Egypt. The “architect of Salafism,” and al-Kawakibi’s mentor, was now in charge of reforming—along western lines—the administration and curricula of al-Azhar, shaping generations of intellectual scholars of Islam. Amongst his “innovative” fatwas stands out one on the permissibility of accepting interest paid on loans, necessary to advance capitalism and Western commercial dominance in the Muslim world. During the last years of his life al-Kawakibi travelled near and far to spread the message of Islamiya and nationhood. And, fulfilling their share of the best jihad, the 'Abduh circle routinely targeted the ulamas and sufis, lampooning and engraving them in the popular memory as the culprits for “what had gone wrong.”

Al-Kawakibi’s writings quickly became staple food for the Egyptian-influenced awakening and dissemination of Islamism in the Islamic world. Although 'Abduh’s reform circle has not found much favour with present-day Islamists, the common genealogy and rampant suspicion of traditional Islam can even be heard through their vociferous antagonism to the reformist agenda as well as their variants of “what went wrong.”

More concerns

The question of “what went wrong?” clearly serves to determine the direction of the reform and to empower those who ask it. But who are those who are qualified to pass judgement on others? Who analyzes their diagnosis, puts it to the test, verifies it, and against which criteria? What vested interest do the askers have in the answer? So many more questions could be asked. They are rarely asked, though. Seemingly, the rhetorical power and dynamics of “What went wrong?,” for instance with Islam, is particularly effective at precluding further questions. For al-Kawakibi and his intellectual descendents, both sympathetic and antagonistic to his ideas, such ruminations are redundant. For him and for them the qualification required for asking the question lies in the very act of asking it. Nothing more is needed.

His young men are propelled forward through the seeming rationality of the question. Estranged from their own tradition—“the problem is that our religion is not our ancestor’s original religion”—they find comfort in mirroring each other as “concerned” modern Muslims, looking at their tradition from the outside. The question helps them construct an echo-chamber where they can hear each other and confirm themselves in their shared (and quite often ambivalent) world-views, mission, goals, and common enemies.

For over a century traditional Islam is sealed and not allowed to speak for itself. To say something about it, one has to stand outside of it.

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Notes

1. First published in Port Said in 1899 by Muhammad Rashid Rida, a revised version appeared in Rida’s (and 'Abduh's) mouthpiece *al-Manar*. Citations will be from the reprint edition of Mohamed Tahhan, ed., *Al-A'mal al-kamila lil-Kawakibi* [The Complete Works of al-Kawakibi] (Beirut, 1995).
2. *Ibid.*, 283.
3. *Ibid.*, 380.
4. *Ibid.*, 373–74.
5. A concept utilized by Sayyid Qutb, ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, half a century later in order to justify breaking away from the mainstream umma.
6. *Ibid.*, 280–81.
7. *Ibid.*, 360–74.
8. *Ibid.*, 308.
9. *Ibid.*, 310.

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