

Working Paper/Documentation

Brochure series published by the
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

No. 155/2006

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Reformist Islam

Protagonists, Methods, and Themes of Progressive Thinking
in Contemporary Islam

Berlin/Sankt Augustin, September 2006

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Abstract

The debate concerning the future of Islam is ubiquitous. Among the Muslim contributions to these discussions, traditionalist and Islamist arguments and perspectives are largely predominant. In the internal religious discourse on Islam, progressive thinkers play hardly any role at all. This bias is unwarranted – for a good number of Muslim intellectuals oppose traditionalist and Islamist ideas, and project a new and modern concept of Islam. Their ideas about the interpretation of the Qur'an, the reform of the Shari'a, the equality of men and women, and freedom of religion are often complex and frequently touch on political and societal taboos. As a consequence, Reformist Islamic thought is frequently ignored and discredited, and sometimes even stigmatised as heresy.

The present working paper identifies the protagonists, methods, and themes of Reformist Islam, and discusses its potential as well as its limits. It argues that Reformist Islamic thought is neither a cure-all for integration problems nor a silver bullet against Islamist terror. However, Reformist Islam can make a significant contribution towards a dynamic reconciliation of Islam with the challenges of modernity, without at the same time severing its ties with the Islamic tradition. Governments should therefore provide the conditions necessary for progressive contemporary Islamic thinking to thrive, avoiding, however, any interference in the content and methods of its theories.

1. Introduction

It has long been evident that not only secular phenomena such as globalization, authoritarianism and poverty stand to blame for the crisis Islamic societies are undergoing. It is also the Muslim understanding of religion and religiosity itself which raises questions. Indeed, there is no way around the realization that several Muslim positions on tolerance, justice, equality, and the freedoms of speech and religion which are prevalent today can barely be reconciled with the principles of the liberal constitutional state. At the same time, it would be rash to conclude that, because of the incompatibility between some aspects of mainstream Islamic theology and the central tenets of the democratic constitutional state, Islam and democracy are structurally irreconcilable. This view of Islam as a pre-modern and undemocratic religion overlooks the elements of transformation and renewal inherent in it. Other religions had to undergo protracted and painful reformation processes in order to define their relationships to modernity. A number of Muslim intellectuals believe that Islam, too, should subject itself to such a process. They consider Islam to be torn between truth and change, authenticity and modernity, and have therefore embarked on the precarious endeavour of dissolving this tension, and delivering Islam into modernity with the help of theological reasoning.

The representatives of the different strands of Islamic reformist theology are generally marginalized by the intra-Islamic debate. At best, they are patronised, ignored, or discredited; in the worst cases they are persecuted as heretics and apostates. Meanwhile, little is known about their ideas, methods, and arguments. Are they the great hope of an Islam that faces up to the challenges of modernity, without at the same time denying its roots and traditions? Or are they a minority which is courted by the West, prettifies Islam, and is completely detached from the realities of Muslim life and faith? This paper¹ identifies the protagonists, methods, and topics of Muslim re-

¹ This paper is a revised and updated version of the German "Reformislam. Akteure. Methoden und Themen progressiven Denkens im zeitgenössischen Islam. Berlin 2006". The author would like to express his gratitude to Jacob Comenetz and Patricia Mussi for the translation. Special thanks goes to Patricia Mussi for her careful reading and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

formist thought, and discusses the potential as well as the limitations of its concepts and ideas.²

2. Terminology

All around the world, Muslims today are engaged in a debate about Islam. This debate knows countless slants and perspectives, but the concept of reform is almost entirely absent from it – for a good reason. Usually, the idea of “reform” refers to the intentional, non-violent transformation of the status quo into something better. The implicit equation of “reform” with “improvement” has led many Muslims to reject the applicability of the concept of reform to Islam. For Islam to them is perfect by definition. It is not susceptible to improvement and hence cannot be reformed. Especially among representatives of Muslim associations, academies, and interest groups, the term and the concept of “Reformist Islam” is thus seen as an attempt by non-Muslims to meddle in internal Muslim affairs – as the expression of a libertarian ideology which contradicts Islam. In their view, “Reformist Islam” is a political invention and essentially alien to true Islam; it is a “Deformist Islam”. A statement released by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany said, for example, “Islam is faced with the threat, due to political and governmental pressure, of being split into two denominations: Islam and Reformist Islam.”³ At least the representatives of German associational Islam would thus seem to agree with Lord Cromer’s famous dictum from the year 1880: “Reformed Islam is no longer Islam at all!”

In practice, a fair number of Muslims have ignored statements of this kind, developing instead a wide variety of ideas for the reformation and restoration of Islam. No consensus has emerged, however, about what exactly “Reformist Islam” refers to or by whom it is represented. Consequently, a broad and highly heterogeneous range of thinkers and approaches has been labelled “reformist”. All these thinkers and approaches have in common their quest for new answers to the question of the rela-

² Many of the thinkers and approaches introduced in this paper were presented and discussed at the joint experts conference entitled “Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam”, held in Berlin by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the Federal Agency for Civic Education from September 22nd to 24th, 2005.

³ Zentralrat der Muslime: Das Kopftuch. Stellungnahme des Zentralrats der Muslime in Deutschland (ZMD), Eschweiler 2003, p. 6.

tionship between Islam and Islamic societies on the one hand and modernity on the other. Four different modernization approaches have been termed “reformist”.

Islamic Modernists

As a result of the confrontation with modernity which colonialism had forced upon them, most Islamic regions at the end of the 19th century witnessed the emergence of more or less influential modernization movements. These movements’ shared concern was to assert Islam in the face of the dominance of Western civilization, while reconciling it with the exigencies of technological and political progress. Thinkers such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and his disciple Rashid Ridda (1865 -1935), drawing inspiration from Western writers and philosophers, began to promote the idea that not Islam itself, but rather its archaic interpretation and its petrified system of norms were to blame for the backwardness of Islamic societies.⁴ Pointing to the Qur’an and to early Islamic practices, they argued that a “pure” and “unadulterated” Islam held the answers to all the questions posed by the modern age. The reconciliation of Islam with modernity was therefore to go hand in hand with a return to the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition, as well as with the internal reawakening of the faithful.⁵ The Islamic Modernists thus laid the groundwork for an Islamic tradition rooted in modernity. At the same time, however, their ideas for a specifically Islamic social model paved the way for a worldview which eventually led to the emergence of Islamism as a distinct ideology.

Modernist Islamists and Conservative Reformers

From the tradition of Islamic modernism there has emerged a group of thinkers, preachers, and activists who assert the priority of Islamic ideas and ideals in the context of modern industrial societies. On the political spectrum of Reformist Islam, this group is located between Islamic conservatism and moderate Islamism⁶: its protago-

⁴ For more on Islamic Modernists cf. Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and `Abduh. An essay on religious unbelief and political activism in modern Islam*, London 1966; and Albert Hourani, *Arabic thought in the liberal age (1798-1939)*, London 1984.

⁵ Cf. Rheinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Muslim World*, London/New York 2002.

⁶ For the difficult distinction between Islamic Conservatism/Traditionalism on the one hand and Moderate Islamism on the other, cf. Cheryl Bernard, *Civil Democratic Islam. Partners, Resources, and Strategies*, RAND, Santa Monica 2003, pp. 30-33. Christian Troll distinguishes between “*cultural/traditional Islam*”, “*Islamist Islam*”, and “*Islam engaged in a process of reinterpretation*”. Cf. Christian Troll, “Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam”. Inaugural address at the experts conference, Berlin 2005.

nists aim for an essentially Islamic political and social order, and Islam is the most important, if not the sole source of their ethic and political attitudes. Their point of departure is an “Islamic” social model which is presented as a superior alternative to the modern “Western” social order; however, this does not imply an outright rejection of the principles of the liberal and democratic constitutional state. In their writings and media appearances, Modernistic Islamists and Conservative Reformers such as the Swiss Muslim thinker Tariq Ramadan, the Egyptian television preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Turkish-American education activist Fethullah Gülen, or the Moroccan politician Nadia Yassine, use modern concepts which they empty, however, of their “Western” content and “Islamize” to support a political interpretation of Islam. These thinkers have adapted their style to the altered consumption patterns and lifestyle habits of young Muslims, and they emphatically advertise their concept of “modernity with a difference.”⁷ Modernist Islamists and Conservative Reformers are less concerned with the reconciliation of modernity with Islam than with the implementation of their own “Islamic” model of modernity. The object of their reformist efforts is not so much Islam, but modernity.⁸

In academia, the assessment of the group of Modernist Islamists and Conservative Reformers is a source of much controversy. Some observers advocate the characterisation of these intellectuals as Islamic Reformists. They argue that, precisely because they are „conservative“, these thinkers are capable of reinventing traditional elements of the faith without calling into question their fundamental validity. As a result, they command the authenticity and credibility which are indispensable for anyone wishing to reconcile Islam with modernity. Conversely, to limit what constitutes “true” Islamic Reformism to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum would be neither meaningful nor legitimate because in the Islamic mindset, reform is always to some extent a return to one’s origins. Only by acknowledging both „conservative“ and „liberal“ reformist thinkers, therefore, one can do justice to the diversity of Islam’s internal reformative discourse.⁹

This academic perspective is problematic because it does not define any clear-cut objectives of said “reform”. The successful preservation of Islamic identity, the strug-

⁷ Cf. the study by Ludwig Amman, Cola und Koran. Das Wagnis einer islamischen Renaissance, Freiburg i. Br. 2004.

⁸ Cf. The critical examination of Tariq Ramadan by Ralph Ghadban, Tariq Ramadan und die Islamisierung Europas, Berlin 2006.

gle for authenticity and the verbal calls for “renewal” alone are not enough to justify the classification of a theory as “reformist”. Rather, the decisive criterion must certainly be whether or not a material reform of Islamic practises is really intended, or whether those claims are mere lip-service aimed at the restoration of said practises in the supposed interest of authenticity. Some of the thinkers described here as Modernist Islamists and Conservative Reformers have developed exciting and creative models for a modern Islamic identity; yet they are essentially and fundamentally distinct from the representatives of “Reformist Islam”. For, while the former group aims at the islamization of modernity, the latter one intends the modernization of Islam.

Secular Modernists

Also present in the debate on Reformist Islam is a third group of thinkers and authors who advocate a secular modernity and demand a reform „of Islam“ in general terms, but who do not propose their own models for reform. This group has entered the (European) public arena to participate in the intensifying debate over the integration of Muslim immigrants into European societies. Authors like the Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali,¹⁰ the German sociologist Necla Kelek,¹¹ or the openly atheistic Ibn Warraq¹² aim primarily to highlight social injustices and to defy taboos, especially in the field of women’s rights. These voices, drawing from personal experiences as well as empirical studies, present a fundamental critique of the lifestyle of many Muslims, as seen from a secular vantage point. Since they do not, however, propose to reform the religion itself, we will not number them among the group of Muslim Reformist Thinkers.

⁹ See for example Katajun Amirpur and Ludwig Amman, *Der Islam am Wendepunkt*, in: Amirpur/Amman 2006, p. 13.

¹⁰ Cf. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin. An Emancipation Proclamation for Woman and Islam*, New York 2006.

¹¹ Cf. Necla Kelek, *Die fremde Braut. Bericht aus dem Inneren des türkischen Lebens in Deutschland*, Köln 2005.

¹² Cf. Ibn Warraq, *Why I am not a Muslim*, New York 2003.

Muslim Reformist Thinkers

The small and relatively heterogeneous group of Muslim Reformist Thinkers¹³ differs from the other participants in the Muslim modernization discourse in at least three ways: First, the target of their reformative efforts is the living practice of faith; second, their point of departure is the intra-Islamic viewpoint of avowed Muslimhood; and thirdly, they use scientific methods. According to the academic debate on Reformist Islam, it is this scientific approach in particular which unambiguously sets them apart from other exponents of the modernization discourse.¹⁴

Muslim Reformist Thinkers view themselves as “progressive” with the implication that, on the opposing side, there is someone who is “regressive”.¹⁵ Their priority is not the vindication of a particular interpretation of Islam, but rather the conviction that by overcoming self-righteous defence mechanisms and by using scientific methods and principles, one can arrive at an understanding of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties which is firmly planted in the living practice of Islam. In contrast to Modern Islamists and Conservative Reformers, Muslim Reformist Thinkers see modernity less as a risk than as an opportunity and a challenge for free thinking. At the same time, modernity itself is by no means exempt from criticism.¹⁶

Despite their commonalities, the protagonists of this school of thought focus on different questions, and employ different approaches and methods in their endeavour to reconcile the Islamic tradition with modernity. As put by Ibrahim Moosa, a South African reformist thinker who teaches in the United States, “Many people think that Progressive Islam is some creed, some movement or some doctrine. I am sorry to disappoint them, but in my view, Progressive Islam or progressive thinking is still very much a work-in-progress. It is not a fully-fledged or clearly elaborated theory. It

¹³ Like the concepts of “liberal Islam”, “Reformist Islam”, or “Islamic Enlightenment”, the idea of “Muslim Reformist Thinkers” rouses controversy. At the Berlin-conference, participants on numerous occasions expressed their dissatisfaction concerning the title “Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam”. Ibrahim Moosa suggested “critical traditionalism” as an alternative, while Abu Zayd and Gudrun Krämer argued for “Muslim reform discourses”. Meanwhile, An-Na’im and Bencheikh defended the use of „progressive thinking“. Due to the lack of consensus, this author has chosen the term “Muslim Reformist Thinkers”, in order to underline that reference is here made to certain Muslim voices within a broader spectrum of opinions.

¹⁴ Cf. Troll 2005.

¹⁵ Cf. the elucidations made by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd at the experts conference, Berlin 2005.

¹⁶ Cf. Rachid Benzine, *Les nouveaux penseurs de l’Islam*, Paris 2004, pp.13-17.

emerges out of certain contexts [...] It is also an amalgam of different experiences and genealogies. There is no one version of Progressive Islam.”¹⁷

Its unfinished state is one of the reasons why the influence and scope of Reformist thought remains limited within Islamic societies. Except in Iran, Muslim Reformist Thinkers have rarely been able to establish their own schools or traditions of thought, and the few successful efforts of this kind have flourished chiefly in secular or non-Muslim environments. Thus, even though there is much talk of progressive thinking in contemporary Islam, it effectively remains a fringe phenomenon of little social and political consequence. At the same time, its themes and methods are as far-reaching as they are original, on top of which they represent the greatest intellectual challenge for Islamism to date.

3. Methods and Themes

Most Muslim reformist discourses take as their starting point the question of the interpretation of the holy scriptures of Islam. On the basis of a scientific understanding of text and revelation, they concern themselves mainly with issues of Islamic law, the role of women, and the relationship between Islam and other religions.

3.1. Revelation and Textual Interpretation

To Muslims, the Qur’an in both its form and content is identical with the eternal and unalterable Word of God. The fact that God addresses mankind in the Arabic language is understood to mean that he has distinguished it above all other languages. This characterization of classical Arabic as quasi-sacred has resulted in the widely-held belief that the Qur’anic language should be neither questioned nor discussed. The mere idea of using linguistics and semiotics, or indeed any hermeneutical method not developed by Muslims, to fathom the Word of God seems outrageous to many contemporary Muslims.¹⁸

Yet the Qur’an is not an easy read. It makes high demands on the reader (and the listener). This is because it was written for an audience familiar with the motifs and imagery of its language. According to the Egyptian reformist thinker Nasr Hamid Abu

¹⁷ Ebrahim Moosa, *What is Progressive Thinking?*, Speech given at the experts conference, Berlin 2005.

Zayd, the Qur'an represents a communicational relationship between a sender (God) and a receiver (man) that is mediated by a linguistic system.¹⁹ A literal interpretation of the Qur'an would therefore be not only wrong, but inappropriate, as it would confuse the eternal Word of God with the ephemeral signs that constitute human language. The linguistic code of an Arabic Bedouin of the seventh century could not possibly be directly understood by an urban dweller of the modern age, and any attempt to read the Qur'an today "as it was written" in the time of its revelation would contradict its purpose as well as its meaning. The Qur'an is not a compendium of laws, but rather a poetically structured text which lends itself to aesthetic reception and is therefore essentially open. To reduce the Qur'an to its surface, Abu Zayd concludes, is to squeeze it into a corset, and does justice neither to its true intentions nor to the constructive potential it holds for culture and society.²⁰

This reading of the revelation does not make Abu Zayd a revolutionary. An entire branch of Islamic theology has traditionally concerned itself with the "grounds of revelation". But Abu Zayd relies not only on traditional methods, but also on his immediate precursors, such as Amin al-Khuli or Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah. As early as the 1940s, Al-Khuli, an Egyptian literary critic, had proposed the thesis that each reader shapes the Qur'an to fit his or her subjective interpretation of it.

The Iranian theologian Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari concurs with the view that interposed between text and believer is the process of interpretation, which is personal and individual.²¹ The Iranian reformist theologian and journalist Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari equally assumes a dialectical relationship between text and reader.²² Each reader interprets the Qur'an differently, especially if he is not a native speaker of Arabic. At any rate, it is no coincidence that particularly non-Arabic thinkers like the Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush insist on the distinction between the Arabic language of the Qur'an on the one hand and its universal message on the other.²³ In Turkey, Mehmet Pacaci und Ömer Özsöy of the theological faculty of the University of Ankara

¹⁸ Cf. Michael Cook, *The Koran. A very short introduction*, Oxford 2000, p. 143.

¹⁹ Cf. Nasr Abu Zayd, *Toward a Hermeneutics of the Qur'an*, in: *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Yearbook 2002/2003*, pp. 222-232.

²⁰ Cf. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Islam und Politik. Kritik des religiösen Diskurses*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, p. 204.

²¹ Cf. Roman Seidel, *Mohammad Shabestari. Faith, Freedom, and Reason*, quoted from www.qantara.de

²² Cf. Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper (eds.), *Islam and democracy in Iran. Eshkevari and the quest for reform*, London 2006.

have been using Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics to advance the historical contextualization of the Qur'an.²⁴ The Parisian professor Mohamed Arkoun, in his "Critique of Islamic Reason", puts forth a similar theory, but addresses himself chiefly to a Western or at least a Western-educated audience.²⁵ Mostly the same is true for the Syrian Reformist Thinker Muhammad Shahrur.²⁶

These efforts at a historical and critical reading of the Islamic text of revelation may taste of academic hair-splitting. But the social and, by implication, political importance of this approach should not be underestimated. A critical exegesis of the Qur'an is indispensable if religious renewal is not to remain a mere rallying-cry, but is to be given sound foundations. Muhammed Shahrur, for example, has time and again made the point that without the proper religious-theological groundwork, any solution to the political and cultural problems of the Muslim world will remain elusive. "The cultural reform which we urgently need today must be a fundamental religious reform. It must include all ideas on which the perpetrators of 9/11 base their independent interpretation of the sources."²⁷

A critical and historical understanding of the Qur'an opens up an entire universe of signs, meanings, and readings which automatically dispel any alleged interpretational monopolies of Islamism. In the opinion of the Muslim "textual critics", the orthodox and fundamentalist religious discourse has had the effect of closing Islam off from the dynamisms of reality. By absorbing as many issues as possible into Islamist thought, the fundamentalists have been able to construct a totalitarian ideology. Therefore, the textual critics argue, the quest for the "spirit of the letter" is the only meaningful strategy for the defence of Islam against attempts at ideological and political manipulation.²⁸

²³ Cf. Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge*, in: Kurzman 1998, pp. 224-251.

²⁴ For more on the so-called „Ankara School“, cf. Körner, Felix: *Revisionist Qur'an Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology*, Würzburg 2005.

²⁵ Time and again, he has been accused of precisely this.

²⁶ „We urgently need religious reforms“, Interview with Muhammad Shahrur, quoted from www.qantara.de

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cf. Benzine 2004, p. 13; Khaled El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name. Islamic Law, Authority and Woman*, Oxford 2001, pp. 93ff.

3.2. Shari'a and Human Rights

There exist a number of fundamental differences in both form and content between the Shari'a, which is the traditional Islamic code of law, and the principles of the democratic constitutional state.²⁹ Accordingly, most criticism of Islamic practises today is sparked off by some aspects of the Shari'a. It is said to cement the repression of women, to contradict modern constitutional principles, and in certain cases to prescribe cruel and inhumane forms of punishment. Therefore, some secular modernists and non-Muslim critics of Islam have time and again called for the wholesale abolition of the Shari'a as the only path to a modern and democratic Islam. This demand, however, is anathema to the vast majority of Muslims. For them, the Shari'a is a constituent element of Islam and a characteristic expression of a Muslim way of life.³⁰ Muslim Reformist Thinkers therefore do not advocate abandoning the Shari'a. Instead, they have developed several ideas and approaches which allow for the preservation of the Shari'a as an integral part of the Islamic faith while at the same time leaving the principles of human rights and constitutionality intact.

Universal human rights are the unrivaled focus of the debate concerning a reformed interpretation of the Shari'a. In this context, the Iranian Reformist Thinker Abdolkarim Soroush has put forth the notion that, since human insight is limited, we can only ever arrive at an approximate understanding of the divine. Man, Soroush argues, can never be exactly sure what God expects him to do. However, what he can do is to try to discern God's intentions by using his faculty of reason, and then act accordingly. With this line of reasoning, Soroush opposes the rigid literalism as well as the human rights concept of Ayatollah Khomeini, who assumed that only God can ever have rights, while man is a mere carrier of duties owed to God and to the community of believers.³¹

Another scholar who has been working to reform the predominant interpretations of the Shari'a is Abdullahi An-Na'im, a Sudanese law professor who teaches at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. An-Na'im advocates a thorough revision of the Shari'a to make it consistent with the requirements of International Law and of human rights principles. With these ideas, he is following in the footsteps of Mahmud Muhammad

²⁹ Cf. Heiner Bielefeldt, *Muslime im demokratischen Rechtsstaat. Integrationschancen durch Religionsfreiheit*, Bielefeld 2003, p. 94.

³⁰ Cf. the standard work by Joseph Schacht, *An introduction to Islamic law*, Oxford 1964.

³¹ Cf. Amirpur 2003, p. 109.

Taha, a Sudanese Reformist Thinker who was executed in 1984 on charges of heresy and apostasy. In the 1960s and 1970s, Taha had promoted an interpretation of Islam which was influenced by popular Islam and European humanism and which aimed to build genuinely Islamic foundations for the principles of constitutionality and human rights. Taha argued that in the past, Islamic legal scholars had adapted the Shari'a to suit the requirements of their respective day and age. As a consequence, today's understanding of the Shari'a is based not so much on the actual divine ideas of the Shari'a, but on their subsequent adaptation and elaboration at the hand of human beings. For this reason, any reformative endeavour in Islamic law would have to begin by "unreading" the developmental history of the Shari'a in order to obtain its true message.³²

Like Taha before him, An-Na'im distinguishes between a Western modernity and an Islamic modernity, and tries to accomplish a modern reconstruction of the Shari'a by reinterpreting its source texts. In his opinion, the Shari'a for a long time constituted a progressive body of law; it was not until the 19th century that it fell out of step with social realities and, as a consequence, lost its comparative advantage. To An-Na'im, the biggest challenge of the present day is to rediscover the original enlightened and humanistic ideals of the Shari'a.³³

This approach has given rise to considerable controversy among Reformist scholars. Abu Zayd in particular deems the distinction between an Islamic and a Western version of modernity as nothing but bad masquerade. On these grounds, he rejects the teachings of An-Na'im's who, he argues, has merely wrapped genuinely secular and "modern" concepts such as civil and human rights in an Islamic "disguise", refusing to accept the fact that the Islamic world has been irrevocably transformed in the totality of its social, cultural and political characteristics. Indeed, the majority of the efforts made by Muslim scholars to reform the Shari'a fail to bridge the fundamental formal incompatibility between religious and secular conceptions of law.

As a consequence, many Muslim Reformist thinkers circumvent this fundamental theoretical problem and instead search for practical arguments which can justify the absolute priority of secular law. The main goal of Khaled Abou El Fadl, an American

³² Cf. Mahmud Muhammad Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*. Translation and Introduction by Abdullahi Ahmad An-Na'im, Syracuse/New York 1996.

³³ Cf. Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Reforming Islam. Sudan and the Paradox of Self-Determination*, in: *Harvard International Review*, Spring 1997, p. 25; Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Islam and Human Rights*, in: *Tikkun*, no. 1/2003, pp. 47ff.

Muslim scholar, is to embarrass the (wahhabistic) jurists who use abstruse lines of argumentation to interfere in the pettiest details of everyday life.³⁴ Soheib Bencheikh, the reformist-minded mufti of Marseilles, and the South African thinker Farid Esack go even further. To Bencheikh, it is a simple fact that neither the Shari'a, nor Catholicism's canon law, nor the Talmud, are compatible with the positive legal codes of the modern age. Just like Farid Esack, who led a successful campaign against the introduction of an Islamic civil status law in South Africa, Bencheikh does not conclude from this that the Shari'a should be abolished; rather, he insists on the absolute priority of positive constitutional law over clerical law in the case of a collision of norms.³⁵ It is evident that the debate over the reinterpretation of the Shari'a has not yet accomplished much, neither in conceptual nor in theological terms. In light of this, a return to traditional methods and principles appears promising indeed. Traditional Islamic legal theory makes a clear distinction between the ethical-religious code of law (Shari'a) and its application at the hands of the Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) whose individual rulings are conditioned by the historical context and environment encountered by it.³⁶ At least conceptually, this distinction can overcome the one-sided and legalistic fixation on the text of the Shari'a, and thereby open up the doors for its reconciliation with the principles of the secular constitutional state.³⁷

3.3. Women and Equality

The re-contextualisation of the Qur'an is also the most important strategy employed by those who try to account for the equality of women and men in Islamic terms. Amina Wadud-Muhsin, for example, in her reflections on the Islamic view of women, rejects the possibility of an unambiguous interpretation of the scripture, and instead demands that each reader and listener identify their own unique way of approaching the Qur'an.³⁸ Wadud-Muhsin's notoriety, however, stems not so much from her writings as from the controversial public sermon she gave in New York City in early

³⁴ Cf. El Fadl 2001; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft. Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, New York 2005.

³⁵ Cf. "About the Life Prospects of Islam in France", Interview with Soheib Bencheikh, quoted from www.islamlib.com.

³⁶ Cf. Gudrun Krämer, *Gottes Staat als Republik. Reflexionen zeitgenössischer Muslime zu Islam, Menschenrechten und Demokratie*, Baden-Baden 1999, pp. 51ff.

³⁷ Cf. Bielefeldt 2003, p. 99; cf. also Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Responsibilities of the Muslim Intellectual in the 21st Century*, in: Farish Noor (ed.), *New Voices of Islam*, Leiden 2002, pp. 15-21.

³⁸ Cf. Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, in: Charles Kurzman, Charles (ed.): *Liberal Islam. A Sourcebook*, New York/Oxford 1998, p. 130.

2005. Her appearance as the “first female imam” before an audience of male believers was sharply condemned by many Muslims and by the majority of religious scholars.

The large group of Muslim women who deploy theological arguments in their struggle for a revised view of women in Islam is most prominently represented by the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi and by the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi. Ebadi, a lawyer, like many other Iranian women’s rights activists bases her work on Abdolkarim Soroush and his notion of the changeability of religious insight. To Ebadi and her sisters-in-arms, there can be no doubt that “his interpretation of Islam opened up a space for the radical redefinition of gender relations.”³⁹

Fatima Mernissi’s reputation meanwhile is founded mainly on her extensive analyses of fundamental texts and sources. It is her merit to have unearthed a plethora of prophetic pronouncements which oppose domestic violence and favour the equality of men and women under the law of succession and in divorce legislation. For Mernissi, it is not a coincidence that out of the vast repertoire of the prophetic tradition, these particular passages did not make it into the canon of values upheld by traditionalists and Islamists.⁴⁰ She has been excoriated not just for this and similar statements, but most of all because she has shown a number of misogynist traditions to have been reported imprecisely and to have been misinterpreted on numerous occasions. She has not shrunk from thus criticising the canonical collections of traditions.⁴¹

3.4. Secularity and Freedom of Religion

An ever-increasing proportion of Muslims today is part of one of the Muslim minorities permanently residing in non-Muslim societies. For Islam, this experience is unheard-of. Unlike Judaism, which as a consequence of the Diaspora was forced to confront the challenges posed by Jewish life in a non-Jewish environment early on, Islam can only approach its own “diaspora” as a new experience. By the same token, concepts of inter-religious convivencia have survived within the Islamic history of thought which are no longer practicable today. Especially Modernist Islamists tend to forestall any

³⁹ Cf. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Religious Modernists and the “Woman Question”. Challenges and Complicities, in: Eric Hooglund (ed.), Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution. Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979, New York 2002, p. 90.

⁴⁰ Cf. Benard 2003, p. 23f.

⁴¹ Cf. Fatima Mernissi, A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam, in: Kurzman 1998, pp. 116-119.

discussion of religious liberty and instead praise the much-cited “tolerance of Islam”. At the end of the day, however, this “tolerance” boils down to the submission of Judaism and Christianity under an Islamic order.

The question of the freedom of religion has traditionally been most pressing to scholars from the “margins” of the Islamic world. Indian and Indonesian thinkers in particular attempted very early on to present a theological rationale for a peaceful coexistence with other religions. Their preferred line of reasoning, however, was not based on a reinterpretation of the classical Islamic concept of tolerance, but on the idea of the “silent Shari’a”.⁴² According to this theory, the Qur’an does not explicitly prohibit the coexistence of Muslims and (non-monotheistic) non-Muslims. Therefore this coexistence has to be regarded as permissible. Indian intellectuals such as Humayun Kabir⁴³ and Syed Wahiduddin⁴⁴ have tried, like the Indonesian Abdurrahman Wahid⁴⁵, to legitimize multi-religious coexistence by arguing that the Shari’a remains purposely silent on this question and intentionally leaves it to be answered by human reason. This kind of reasoning can make it easier for Muslims to embrace the living practises of secularism and religious liberty. Yet the theory fails to resolve the aforementioned basic contradiction between religious and the secular conceptions of law.

For this reason, other theories steer clear of the traditional interpretations of texts and laws, basing themselves instead on the underlying spirit of the Revelation.

Farid Esack for example, using as a backdrop the experiences of the multi-religious anti-apartheid movement, calls for a turn towards religious liberalism and multi-religious pluralism. There could be, he argues, no better expression of the spirit of early Islam, a spirit which is essentially built on a theology of religious diversity.⁴⁶ The well-known Syrian philosopher and sociologist Sadiq Al-Azm, too, avoids any reference to the exegesis of the Shari’a in his defence of the freedom of religion; instead, he declares religious tolerance a value which is universal and, by this token, Islamic too.⁴⁷

⁴² For more on the concept of “silent Shari’a”, cf. Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam and Its Islamic Context*, in: Kurzman 1998, pp. 14-16.

⁴³ Cf. Humayun Kabir, *Minorities in a Democracy*, *ibid*, pp. 148, 152.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kurzman, *Liberal Islam and Its Islamic Context*, *ibid*, p. 22. In general cf. also Jackie Assayag, *Can Hindus and Muslims Coexist?*, in: Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (eds.), *Lived Islam in South Asia. Adaption, Accommodation & Conflict*, Delhi 2004, pp. 40-58.

⁴⁵ Cf. Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam and Its Islamic Context*, in: Kurzman 1998, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Cf. Sadiq Al-Azm, *Unbehagen in der Moderne. Aufklärung im Islam*, Frankfurt a. M. 1993, p. 49.

In Europe, particularly the French mufti Soheib Bencheikh has received attention for his permanent campaign for the unconditional acceptance of secularism and religious liberty. For Bencheikh like for the Franco-Tunisian Abdelwahab Meddeb⁴⁸, the politicisation of religion lies at the heart of the malady afflicting modern Islam. This politicisation stems from a disregard for the Qur'anic message which is neglected in favour of unreliable sources. However, according to Bencheikh, only the Qur'an is holy. The prophetic tradition is not. From these assumptions, Bencheikh derives a clear commitment to the freedom of religion: "Religions should promote their message as confidently as possible. This includes the authorisation of emancipation. This is what makes them strong."⁴⁹ In effect, Bencheikh argues, the Islamic ban on conversion is just as unfounded as it is anachronistic.

4. Charges against Reformist Islam

His ideas have landed Soheib Bencheikh on the death lists of Algerian terrorist groups. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd on his part was faced with an absurd divorce suit in Egypt and had to immigrate to the Netherlands.⁵⁰ Abdullahi An-Na'im had fled Sudan for the USA as early as the 1980s. Sayyid al-Qimni, Muhammad Shahrur, Shirin Ebadi, Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, Fatima Mernissi, Abdolkarim Soroush, and many others find themselves the targets of intimidation and harassment in their home countries. Among the accusations levelled at them and at other reformist scholars, four main types can be distinguished:

Lack of Authenticity

Seeing as Muslim Reformist Thinkers avail themselves of supposedly „Western“ methods, they are particularly vulnerable to accusations of lacking authenticity. A typical example of this mechanism is found in the case of Soheib Bencheikh. While he is praised and courted by non-Muslim liberals, he has hardly caused a stir among the local Muslim population, who rather tends to dislike him. Other European and

⁴⁸ Cf. Abdelwahab Meddeb, *The Malady of Islam*, New York 2003

⁴⁹ Bencheikh, Soheib, *Zurück in die Zukunft. Qur'an-kritik in der europäischen Diaspora. Ein Gespräch von Michael Briefs mit Soheib Bencheikh*, in: Christoph Burgmer, Christoph (ed.): *Streit um den Qur'an. Die Luxemburg-Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe*, Berlin 2005, p. 115.

⁵⁰ For more information on the internal political background of the "Abu Zayd affair", cf. George Sfeir, *Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd*, in: *Middle East Journal*, no. 3/1998.

American Reformist Thinkers have not fared much better. As they gradually succeed in rousing a response among the political elites, their original constituencies turn a deaf ear on them.

The widespread practise whereby Reformist Thinkers are discredited as being politically sponsored “model Muslims” is nothing but an expression of the basic Islamic assumption that nothing and nobody can ever be “Western” and “Islamic” at the same time. Under the impression of his own experience, Sadiq Al-Azm in particular has explained how dissociation from the West has become the distinguishing mark of conservative and Islamist thinkers within the Islamic world.⁵¹ In fact, the anti-Western discourse in many Islamic societies has gained so much power that even Reformist Thinkers have been forced to adopt an attitude of dissociation. Not least for this reason has the ostensible rejection of the west become a vital catchphrase for the Reformist Thinkers who live in Islamic countries. If they refused to follow suit, they would risk being branded the “Uncle Toms” of Islam.⁵²

Unsettling the Faithful

The single most menacing charge brought against Muslim Reformists by traditionalists and Islamists is the one of “unsettling the faithful”. Since Muslim Reformist Thinkers call into question the most fundamental assumptions of Islamist ideology, Islamists typically retaliate by combining the relatively innocuous-sounding complaint of “causing uncertainty” with allegations of heresy or even apostasy. This latter accusation is a particularly powerful weapon against Reformist Islam because in classical Islamic law, defection from the faith is a crime punishable by death. This charge, and the concomitant imposition of the infidel status, is a popular way of shutting up critics. Abu Zayd, Eshkevari, An-Na’im and many other have been subjected to it.

Arbitrariness

Another complaint about Muslim reformism, and one which is rather more founded in fact, regards its individualism and its arbitrariness. By continuously adjusting to new political and social demands and requirements, it is argued, Reformist Islam is losing touch with the living practises of the faith. Also, it is perceived to elude critical exami-

⁵¹ Cf. Al-Azm 1993, p. 47.

⁵² According to the British Muslim Gai Eaton, writing on Muslim reform thinkers. Cf. Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, New York 1985, p. 11.

nation because it argues that Islam is constantly changing, diverse and heterogeneous. Reformist Islam, its critics say, has a tendency to posit as “the essence of Islam” the individual preferences and opinions of its own exponents. Observers have attested a proclivity for “ad-hoc essentialism”.⁵³ What will remain of Islam, Masud Ahmed Khan asks in his critique of Farid Esack, if people like Esack hope that one day, Hindu priests will officiate weddings in mosques. Khan argues that this sort of subjectivist and hyper-liberal theology whose only principle is “anything goes”, cannot be the answer to the problems of Islam, but, on the contrary, threatens to deprive it of its normative power and eventually leads to its self-destruction.⁵⁴ Thinkers like Abu Zayd and Soroush are aware of the risk that their ideas might destabilize the certainties that many people draw from their religion. For this reason, Abu Zayd underscores the personal character of his theory, and admits that his approach is problematic because it lifts almost all barriers from the interpretation of Islam.

Scientific Individualism

Reformist Islam is without doubt an elitist affair. Many Muslim Reformists go for intellectual seclusion rather than for mass appeal – not least for considerations of personal safety. In addition, the reformist debate is exceedingly complex and only superficially related to the spiritual needs of the religious community. Considerable knowledge and a thorough theological education are needed to understand its arguments. Moreover, it is precisely the scientific character of Reformist Islam which is the thorn its detractors’ sides. For while Muslim Reformists employ much the same methods as traditionalists and Islamists, they, unlike their opponents, can also draw on a thorough education and a sound methodological training. The complaint of “scientific individualism”, therefore, is intended to neutralize this competitive advantage enjoyed by the Reformists.⁵⁵

⁵³ Cf. the compelling article about “soft” and “hard” interpretations of Islam by Stefan Weidner, *Zum Kampf der Waffen und Begriffe. Über harte und weiche Islamdeutungen*, in: *Merkur*, no. 662, June 2004, p. 505.

⁵⁴ Cf. Masud Ahmed Khan, *Review of Farid Esack’s The Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, quoted from: www.masud.co.uk

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

5. Expectations for Reformist Islam

In the face of these severe accusations, it has been asked whether Reformist thinkers and their ideas stand any chance at all of exerting influence on mainstream Islamic theology and politics. Therefore, the supporters of Reformist Islam have elaborated a number of scenarios in which Reformist Islam may soon have a wider social impact. Again, four main types of argument can be identified:

Counter-Islamism

Because of their thorough theological education, many Muslim scholars regularly manage to out-reason Islamist preachers. Muslim Reformist thinkers are capable of dismantling the fundamental ideological constructions of Islamism, and of exposing supposed divine truths for what they really are: the instruments of a totalitarian political agenda. As a result, the Reformists may turn out to be important political actors if, in the spirit of “Counter-Islamism”, an intellectual strategy is to be developed against the basic ideological assumptions and argumentative staples of political Islam.

Religious Support

Reformist Islam represents an alternative not only to Islamism, but also to secularization and religious apathy. The critical and constructive presence of Reformist Thinkers in the Islamic public discourse can point young Muslims to alternative lifestyle concepts and to the grounding and support that may be found in faith; Reformists can also disrobe Islam of the allure of provocation. Abdou Filali-Ansary, a Moroccan Muslim scholar who teaches in the United Kingdom, rightly calls attention to the problem that many Islamist terms and concepts have been absorbed indiscriminately into general linguistic repertoire, where they mostly remain unchallenged. This “Islamization” of the debate on Islam has caused universal principles to drift into the shadows. But a murder has to be called a murder, Filali-Ansary insists, and not glorified as “jihad”.⁵⁶ Reformist Islam is an opportunity especially for young Muslims to make independent lifestyle choices without having to recur to Islamist or traditionalist concepts and ideas. Whether this opportunity will be realized is a question of authority: Only if

⁵⁶ Cf. Abdou Filali-Ansary, Jihad or murder?, in: Daily Times, August 18th, 2005.

Reformist thinkers gain acceptance and authority will they be able to influence the internal religious debate on Islam.

Acceptance

Muslims rightly demand tolerance and respect for their religion. However, this legitimate demand is often misapplied to mean tolerance for Islamist and conservative practises, legal interpretations and codes of dress. As a result, those who criticize Islamist demands for exceptions from the law, run the risk of being stigmatised as Islamophobic or xenophobic. In addition, the rift which has opened up in the public debate, separating the “supporters of Islam” from the “critics of Islam”, does not exactly further the integration of Muslims in Western societies. Reformist Islam can help to soften this opposition and to show the West a way out of the dilemma between blind and indulgent tolerance and intolerant rigor bent on the clash of civilizations. It can raise a kind of political and social sympathy and interest for Islam that overrides all legal disputes, and it can thus make a contribution towards the recognition of Islam as a religious and political reality in Europe.

Interlocutors

In Germany as in the whole of Europe, political and social agencies and institutions are in sore need of Muslim interlocutors. They need partners with whom they can negotiate practical issues such as the development of curricula for Islamic religious instruction in state schools, the construction of mosques, and the handling of funerals and of pastoral care; but they also need to establish a political and social “dialogue with Islam”. The various Muslim organizations would seem to be the first choice in this respect, particularly in Germany. However, these organizations command little popular legitimacy and tend to compete with each other. Muslim Reformist Thinkers do not have the capacity to fill this gap and to serve as the (sole) representatives “of Islam” in Europe. They simply lack the necessary mass appeal, and often find it difficult to relate to practical issues. However, they can serve as additional interlocutors for the public authorities, for associations and providers of civic education, and thus complement the spectrum of Muslim life engaged in social dialogue.

6. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Progressive thinking in contemporary Islam is not a panacea for integration problems, nor is it a wonder weapon against Islamist terror. Yet Muslim Reformist Thinkers can create the theoretical basis for the resolution of the tensions between Islam and modernity which are so keenly felt both by Muslims and non-Muslims. Since Muslims set great store by authenticity, particularly when their religion is at stake, the political and social supporters of reformist Islamic thought should concentrate on the provision of infrastructures and on the improvement of the general conditions encountered by the Reformists. Three kinds of political action appear to be meaningful:

Provide a Backing

Most Reformist Thinkers living in Islamic countries are permanently at risk. They are molested, harassed, shunned, discriminated against, forced into divorces and sentenced to death. In Islamic countries, a critical analysis of Islam almost always touches on current political issues which in turn pertain to the precarious balance between religion and state, as well as to the respective legal codes. For this reason, these governments' attitudes to Muslim reformist thought are always reserved and often hostile.⁵⁷ The case of Abu Zayd has amply demonstrated that public authorities and political decision-makers are wary of giving public support to critical thinkers. But other cases, such as the one of Shirin Ebadi, have also highlighted the great importance of international backing in guaranteeing the safety of Muslim Reformist Thinkers. An international reputation can, for those Thinkers, entail the public renown they need to guard their independence when the domestic going gets tough.

Create a Public

The results and findings of Muslim Reformist Thinkers rarely make the news. Especially to non-Muslims and non-experts, books by the likes of Abu Zayd, El Fadl or Soroush are fairly inaccessible. Accordingly, Reformist Thinkers are not usually famous for their articles and lectures, but rather for having caused one scandal or another. To make things worse, most of them teach at Western universities, and only few work at mosques or madrasahs.⁵⁸ They write and speak mainly with non-Muslim

⁵⁷ Cf. Troll 2005.

⁵⁸ Cf. Benard 2003, p. 40.

audiences in mind, or else to Muslims who have been socialized in the West. This is where their ideas and methods are received with sympathy and approval. However, they do not possess of the necessary resources to spread and popularize their ideas in the Islamic world. Islamists and traditionalists, by contrast, have at their disposal a multitude of sponsors and donations, as well as radio and TV channels, newspapers, schools, welfare organizations, and, importantly, a vast amount of websites and chat-rooms.⁵⁹ Muslim Reformist Thinkers have little to set against that. As Muhammad Shahrur observes, they do not own any satellite stations.⁶⁰ This is why politicians and the media should make an effort to give Muslim Reformists publicity and to involve them more strongly in the discussion about, with and within Islam.

Facilitate Networks

The history of progressive thinking in Islam has mostly been one of lonely struggles. Muslim Reformist Thinkers tend to see themselves as scholars and authors with individual research agendas. They participate in academic debates, but have not as yet managed to establish any cross-regional schools of thought. The opponents of Reformist Islam, by contrast, rely on well-established networks. This is why Ibrahim Moussa finds it obvious that, “It is the conservatives and the Islamists who publicly talk, think and decide over Islam. The progressives have to try and to match that presence with the help of an intellectual network and plug themselves into the public debate.”⁶¹ Western governments can assist the formation of such networks by providing an infrastructure as well as financial support. Like any other idea, Reformist Islam will not succeed unless it grows into a movement.

⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁰ „We urgently need religious reform”, Interview with Muhammad Shahrur, in: www.qantara.de

⁶¹ Ibrahim Moussa at the experts conference, Berlin 2005.

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