

THREE REFORMERS AGAINST VIOLENT JIHAD TRÊS REFORMADORES CONTRA O JIHAD VIOLENTO

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“Point n’est besoin d’espérer pour entreprendre, ni de réussir pour persévérer.”

Attributed to William of Orange, “the Taciturn”, 1533-1584

In late 2015 a *YouTube* movie went viral in Holland: arbitrary passants in a street were confronted with a few bloodthirsty verses read from a book with a green cover imprinted with the ominous title “Holy Qur’an”. The quotes call for executing female teachers and the slaughter of homosexuals. Ah, you see how far *their* religion is from us Westerners, bystanders reacted, not without a tinge of pity. In one’s mind’s eye, one almost saw their thought: and *those* people are living among *us*? Then the interviewer removes the false cover and reveals that the quotations are from the Bible.² The surprise is immense.

The recent turn of the “Islam debate” has rendered topical again a number of “oldfashioned” theological questions. It appears that the link between Islam and violence is neither as evident nor as exceptional as is often alleged. The Qur’an includes, just like the Bible, severe verses alongside compassionate messages. In the believers’ mind, this creates a confusion how to understand God’s word - a confusion as old as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam themselves. Regarding the latter, the discussion divides today also, and foremost, Muslims themselves. How to depolarize this controversy? Which role do Islamic thinkers play in this? Let us for once shift our gaze from those anti-Western Islamists who through word and deed attract plenty of media attention, to focus on the ideas and programs of a few of Islam’s numerous reformers.

After any terror attack, the charge has become commonplace: “Why doesn’t the supposed peaceful majority of Muslims who reject terrorism ever make its voice heard?” The allegation betrays a blatant ignorance. Whoever goes through the trouble to check it, will encounter numerous condemnations of terrorism, coming from a wide gamut of

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² “Experiment: Een Bijbel met de kaft van de Koran. Vooroordelen nemen de overhand.” (in Dutch: Experiment: A Bible with the cover of the Qur’an: prejudice takes over. Original upload (with English subtitles) of The Holy Quran Experiment. 4-12-2015. In: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5LDxI79XEw> (access 3-1-2018)

Islamic currents.³ However, over the last years the debate has exacerbated to the point where the pastel tints in the shrinking intermediate zone between Islamic State on the one hand, and Donald Trump, Marine le Pen, and “Alternative for Germany” on the other, are bleached out by the fiercer black-and-white of the radical wings. This attention to Islamist terrorists is understandable but produces a distorted image.

Opinion research in 2008 by specialists John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed (by no means Islamophobic) confirmed that less than only one tenth of Muslims worldwide sympathized with Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda.⁴ That is only mildly reassuring: that proportion still leaves over one hundred million Muslim sympathizers of terror. While we don’t have accurate data on how tendencies have developed since, it seems unlikely that the Western model has become more popular in the Islamic world in the Obama era, or since. However, the prospect of a coexistence in equality of Muslims (close to a quarter of world population) and non-Muslims will depend on how the non-fundamentalist majority will develop.

How to classify nonradical and non-anti-Western Islam? If we consider **Islamists** as the politicized Rightwing of the Islamic world, with violent **jihadis** as the extremist outlier, proponents of Reform of Islam and of coexistence with non-Muslims (**reformists**) would make up the Islamic Left, with those Muslims who have explicitly broken with their faith (but not with the Islamic community or identity) as the opposite extreme: **secular Muslims** and **apostates**. In between both contrasting tendencies we may then situate a vast but little expressive **middle** zone. Like other groups originating outside the Western world this majority seems to be caught up in a comprehensive and painful transition towards modernity. Here religious, national, and still other definitions of collective identity compete for loyalty, both in Muslim majority societies in the Third World and among Muslim minorities in the West. A considerable part of the latter consists even in not very Orthodox Muslims who, were the West to allow it, might well assimilate in a generation or two. This is less surprising if one recalls that only half a century ago, most viewed themselves as Turk, Bangladeshi, Berber, Persian or Arab rather than as Muslim, the religious label being in many cases a recent identity badge. Between this numerous middle group and the small minority of defectors we thus find the field of operation of the **Islamic reformers**.

Different from Catholics, Muslims have never been prohibited from reading their own Holy Scripture, on the contrary. However, as in other religions, God’s word is susceptible to a variety of interpretations. The status of the Qur’an – Revelation or Inspiration? – separates the majority who considers it God’s literal word from a minority relating to it in a more “modern”, historicizing or allegoric way. Similar discussions pertain

³ E.g. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kamran-pasha/the-big-lie-about-muslim_b_188991.html; *Informed Comment* 9-7-2005, Juan Cole, “Friedman Wrong About Muslims Again”: <https://www.juancole.com/2005/07/friedman-wrong-about-muslims-again-and.html>; <https://muslimscondemn.com/>; *The Guardian* 26-3-2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2017/mar/26/muslims-condemn-terrorism-stats>. (access 3-1-2018)

⁴ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks For Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. Gallup Press, 2008. Cf. data from other and more recent polls quoted in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_attitudes_toward_terrorism which documents Muslim rates of rejection of terrorism, ranging from 50 to 88% depending on place and time. (access 1-1-2018)

to the words and acts of the Prophet: are they authentic reports or edifying confabulations? Do Muhammad's examples commit the believer or not? To non-Muslims these questions may seem arcane. Yet any solution to the challenge of coexistence between Muslims and others depends on how each group relates to the fundamentals of its faith and values. On the Islamic side of the divide, what is at issue are questions such as (among many others): do non-Muslims, living in Muslim majority countries (or elsewhere) have a right to express their own (un)belief even where it offends Muslim sensibilities? should convicted thieves have their hand cut off? may a Muslim girl marry a Christian, Jew, or Sikh man?

Who may decide these dilemmas, and on what criteria?

On such questions, we encounter a gamut of opinions. The most conservative reformers accept the literal authority of the Qur'an but emphasize its more tolerant verses. Tariq Ramadan, perhaps Europe's best known and doubtless most visible Muslim intellectual, exemplifies this line of thought.⁵ But many go further. Those who advocate a new reading of the same old holy text, or consider it as historically determined and hence not universally valid, go one step further. Abdullahi an-Na'im, discussed below, represents this current: the deeper meaning of the verse may differ from its *prima facie* reading.⁶

More liberal voices may not believe the Qur'an is God's immediate and inerrant word and yet view Islam as a (or *the*) source of norms and of spiritual inspiration. Irshad Manji follows this path, along with a galaxy of feminist Muslimas: the controversial verse may mean something else than its immediate content, or even be obsolete. Former radicals such as Maajid Nawaz argue likewise.⁷ Marginal or ex-Muslims such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali go several steps further and demand a fundamental reformation of the faith.⁸ At the extreme margins of the reformist spectrum one encounters overt apostates, such as Ibn Warraq, who have left the religion of Islam and encourage others to do the same, without necessarily abandoning the Islamic community in a social, political or identity sense.⁹

Whoever reads the Qur'an soon notices that those apodictic expressions favored by Islamists (and Islam bashers who use them to advocate its prohibition) make up only a minimal part of the text. The Qur'an commands to "enjoin right and forbid evil" (3:104). In fact this is an order to improve human relations and society – an underlying social utopia that moves Islam, though in practice it sometimes develops into totalitarian pressure. But one encounters something similar in other monotheistic religions *e.g.* in the Thora¹⁰ but also in the Prophets' fiery sermons against ritualism, hypocrisy, and social injustice. Still it is hard to deny that Islam has from the onset been a more political religion than most. This stronger focus on society explains both its success and its current problems. In reality no

⁵ Tariq Ramadan, (2004) *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*. Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.

⁶ "Conversations with History - Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im" (Harry Kreisler, 12-3-2010). In: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg3hLdJLrOY> (access 12-2015)

⁷ Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*. Harvard University Press; 1 edition (October 6, 2015).

⁸ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Heretic: Why Islam needs a Reformation Now*. New York, etc.: HarperCollins, 2015.

⁹ Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim*. Prometheus, 1995.

¹⁰ *Leviticus* 19:17: "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him."

religion and no ideology seems to be immune against radical and violent reinterpretation of axioms that at the onset were fair and humane. However, the path from introverted and resigned religiosity to political (eventually, violent) activism is perhaps shorter in Islam than elsewhere.

In past centuries Islam has suffered repeated defeats at the hands of the “Near West”. In reaction to imperialism hitting it from the outside, but no less to theological and cultural ossification at home, a variety of (sometimes politicized) revivalist movements has over the last 150 years emerged within the Islamic world. Oddly, fundamentalist and modernist currents in Islam share in part the same origins: in either case (and similar to Renaissance and Reformation in the West) the aim was to breathe new life in faith and civilization, to create a rebirth by returning to their Late Antiquity roots and to scythe down all the weeds of the intermediary “middle ages”. The main difference lies in what element “liberal” and “puritan” reformers pick up as most fundamental in their recovered legacy. And in particular with the more radical currents, things have at times gotten out of hand. Just like the French and Russian Revolution wrested State power from absolute monarchy in order to establish democracy, but then employed this State power in the service of wide-ranging social engineering projects that soon turned ghastly (the Terror; Stalinism), thus Islamists want to conquer the State to use its monopoly of power as a lever to bring about *their* utopia: a society put on strict religious footing. Hence Khomeini, the Lenin of the Iranian Revolution, insisted in establishing an “Islamic republic”, not a democracy nor even an “Islamic democratic republic”.¹¹

As in every revolution, in Islamism too excess brought disappointment, and disappointment, repugnance and rethinking: “What went wrong?”; “How to avoid that next time?” without throwing away the baby with the bathwater. How to design a society true to God’s promise without it degenerating in a dictatorship that will end up chasing away from party, church, or mosque a people become disgusted with religion? Contemporary Islamic reformers remind in this respect of Marxist intellectuals trying to navigate between the Scylla of wild capitalism and the Charybdis of the Gulag. Hence Iranian reformist philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush rejects the Islamic state as a matter of principle: the mix of faith and politics is not just bad for public life, he argues, but corrupts religion itself. His attitude is shared by many reformers.¹²

Three examples

More people presumably have heard of *The Satanic Verses* as the title of the book that gained British-Indian author Salman Rushdie a death sentence from Khomeini, the leader of Iran’s Islamic revolution, than know that the progressive Islamic writer linked his 1988 novel to a few verses notoriously disappeared from the Qur’an. The story goes that to make the message he was preaching more palatable to the still polytheistic Meccans,

¹¹ *Middle East Report & Information* (MERIP) 10, 88 (5/6-1980) “Khomeini: ‘We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology’”. Reproduced in: <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer88/khomeini-we-shall-confront-world-our-ideology> (access 2-1-2018)

¹² Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential writings of --*. Translated, edited, and with a critical introduction by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmed Sadri. Oxford, etc.: Oxford UP, 2000.

the Prophet had smuggled in a passus in favor of three popular Arab deities (whose shrines, attracting lots of pilgrims, were a bonanza local tourism). God became angry that the Prophet had out of opportunism tampered with the holy revelation. Repentant, Muhammad supposedly blamed the Devil for framing him and quickly removed these “Satanic verses.” Rushdie reworked these and other scenes in ways offensive to many Muslims.¹³

But not to all. Fellow Islamic reformer Irshad Manji, for instance, uses the Muhammad’s shortcoming in this same incident as the point of departure of her own cry of protest: if even God’s Prophet does not escape pressures of his environment, then it is clear that we are all entangled in social webs. Muslims in particular, she says, must learn to stand up to social pressure from their coreligionists, and dare to express unpopular messages.¹⁴ She understands the heterodox story thus as *empowering* her personal and extremely liberal reading of the Divine revelation and uses the Qur’an itself to justify her contrarian attitudes.

Manji is only one among a sizable number of avant garde Muslim thinkers who, although very different in method and theological-political premises, all share a commitment to bridging the gap between Islam and modernity, democracy, and human rights. This pluriform nature of progressive Islam may become clearer if we briefly compare how three very diverse figures wrestle with their faith: a Sufi human rights specialist, a feminist do-it-yourself theologian, and a recanted jihadist. We select these three thinkers/activists for illustrative purposes: a much wider gamut exists of reformers and activists whose source of inspiration is the selfsame Islam that in the hands of an Osama bin Laden or an Ibrahim al-Baghdadi had turned into a rationale and instrument of oppression.

(1) Abdullahi an-Na’im (1946-) is a Sudanese Sunni thinker who has been living in de US for decades. A thoughtful and articulate professor of Law at Emory University, Na’im has excellent personal reasons for rejecting the ideal of a (and a fortiori *the*) Islamic State. His teacher, the softspoken Sufi-inspired philosopher Mahmoud Mohammed Taha got in trouble with Ja’far Numeiri, the dictator who in the 1980s dreamed of transforming Sudan in a shari’a state. In 1985, Taha was hanged in public for deviation from the official doctrine. Na’im got the hint, and fled to the USA where, taking Taha’s ideas as his starting

¹³ Tabari, *Ta’rikh I*, 1192ff, quoted in: G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam From Polemic to History*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1999. Pp. 131-132. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses: a Novel*. New York: Random, 2008 (1988, 1st.)

¹⁴ “Mehdi Hassan: “...What is the trouble with Islam today in your view?”

Irshad Manji: “In a word, Muslims. We are the trouble with Islam today. We have allowed tribal culture to colonise the faith of Islam. But the good news in saying this is that we are also the source of reform. Meaning that we can literally draw inspiration from our own scripture, from the Quran in order to reform our hearts, our spirits and our beings. And one passage that has been profoundly inspirational for me, is the one that states, “believers conduct yourself with justice and bear true witness before God”. And here is the revolutionary part, “even if it be against yourselves, your parents, or your relatives”. This is a call for moral courage, this is a call to stand up when others want you to sit down. And it is part of what makes Islam as a faith revolutionary in the 21st Century, not just in the 7th.”

Head to Head, *Transcript: Irshad Manji on Islamophobia*. In: <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/headtohead/2016/01/transcript-irshad-manji-islamophobia-160123075229052.html> (access 5-1-2018)

point, he developed his own Islamic liberation theology. Na'im rejects Islamism i.e. political or radical Islam. Anti-Western fanatics are, he argues, much more influenced by the West than they acknowledge. Yet political Islam borrows is exactly what Na'im recuses. While rejecting the West's (neo)colonial dominance, Islamists have kept a key Western Jacobin concept: the centralized totalitarian State. Such a state has no basis in Islamic history. Although the Ottoman Empire in its heyday was hardly a walkover, precolonial Muslim realms were no strong States in a modern sense – *pace* Orientalists' imagery of the capricious and omnipotent sultan.

Like many moderate Muslim intellectuals, Na'im opts for secular democracy. But is that then not another Western import? Na'im replies that Islam does not oppose absorbing good ideas from other civilizations. The Golden Age itself was, after all, a prototype of cultural cross-fertilization. Demonization of the West is an admission of weakness. While it is laudable were a majority to vote democratically in favor of Islamic policies, the constitution ought to remain religiously neutral with protective guarantees for dissident minorities. In this context Na'im defends the "right to heresy".¹⁵ Human rights, he posits, are not specifically Western but universal: in Muslim societies they should be justified Islamically. In the footsteps of numerous Muslim scholars and Western Islamologists, Na'im builds his case by differentiating the early Qur'an verses "descending" to Muhammad when he was still an isolated preacher in Mecca, from the later ones that originate in his second period, when the Prophet with his small group of followers established the first Islamic polity in Medina. Na'im, however, also differentiates the Qur'anic verses in terms of validity. The older group of verses is more liberal and tolerant, and for Na'im these represent Islam's universal truth. The second collection is more severe, intolerant and occasionally bellicose. Na'im argues that the latter group fitted the seventh century A.D. conditions but does not bind today's believers. By turning it against itself, he thus makes quick work with the "abrogation" (*naskh*) strategy, normative for most orthodox Muslims and beloved of fundamentalists, who apply it to cancel earlier and "softer" verses by later harsher ones.

According to Na'im God does not act in the world but through human agency.¹⁶ This puts a burden of responsibility on the shoulders of us all. Authentic change can only happen through gradual internal cultural transformation, such as he promotes through his publications. Na'im's path is thus the opposite of his radical opponents avid for publicity: it entails a largely invisible, patient and antlike labor of *influencing the influencers*. The reformist has a duty to be as persuasive and intelligible as he can, but cannot be held responsible for the end result. Na'im is a long term optimist because he believes that rational convincing is more realistic than trying to impose values: a vain attempt, as power exists only in the eyes of the beholder.

¹⁵ Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im, *Islam and the secular State: Negotiating the future of Shari'a*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 2008; Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im, "Human Rights, Universality and Sovereignty: The Irrelevance and Relevance of Sharia." In: *Global Policy* 4,4 (2013) pp. 401-408.

¹⁶ An-Na'im suggests that

"...the divine sources are only capable of speaking hermeunetically i.e. selectively) through human agency: 'The Qur'an does not speak but (men and women) speak for the Qur'an.' It follows that we cannot speak of the exclusive soeverignty of God when we know that in practice it will have to be exercised by men".

Quoted in: Ali Mirsepassi and Tadd Graham Fernée, *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism: At Home and in the World*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2014p.167.

Na'im exemplifies an undercurrent within progressive Islam which over the ages has been expounded, promoted, and represented by the Sufis, Muslim mystics who throughout the ages have stressed the esoteric knowledge contained in the Qur'an. Soroush too stands within this tradition. So does Turkish expatriate teacher Fethullah Gülen (a pupil of Turkish Sufi master Said Nursi, and certainly no reformer of Islam), nowadays President Erdogan's primetime culprit, whose *Hizmet* ("Service") movement runs tens of smallscale but endlessly multiplicable coexistence projects across the globe: schools, hospitals, community outreach centers, humanitarian interventions, and the like. *Hizmet's* active supporters are estimated to number at a few million. For Gülen no authentic Muslim can be terrorist. In 2015 he published in *Le Monde* a razor sharp condemnation of the Paris attacks. His opening sentence was telling: "Muslims, we have to critically review our understanding of Islam."¹⁷

(2) By temperament and style of work, Canadian-Ugandan-Bangladeshi author **Irshad Manji** is the polar opposite of the older and somewhat professoral Na'im. She is funny, extraverted, irrepressible. Despite differences, though, their opinions are not all that far apart. Central for Manji is the endeavor to relegitimize *ijtihad*, i.e. free and individual interpretation of Islam, disallowed for a millennium. In 2004 Manji gained notoriety with her *The trouble with Islam today* which criticized misogynist ideas and practices in Islam such as genital mutilation, forced marriage, honor killings, as well as still existing (or reemergent) slavery, sexual or otherwise, and Muslim anti-Semitism. Rather than reject the other, she argues, Muslims must come to terms with him or her - and with the diversity of today's world. More than anything else, however, her book (which became a global bestseller) is an attack on the Islamic tradition of literal understanding of the Qur'an: by contrast Manji pleads for understanding the text in its historical context, and reading in it the symbolical messages relevant to our modern needs.

"... I refuse to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah."¹⁸: after such a confession it hardly surprised that, according to her own confession, Manji faith hangs on a silken cord. And so does the life itself of this (non-headscarf donning) Muslima who is also a self-declared lesbian active in defending gay rights. As against Orthodox Muslims who cling to their consensual, logically and historically constructed exegesis of the fundamentals of faith (and recall that the Prophet has himself affirmed the umma's consensus to be infallible)¹⁹, liberal Muslims point out verses where the Qur'an itself

¹⁷ *Le Monde* 17-12-2015: <http://rumiform.org/gulen-lemonde/>;

Fethullah Gülen, *Musulmans, procédons à un examen critique de notre compréhension de la foi* http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/12/17/musulmans-procedons-a-un-examen-critique-de-notre-comprehension-de-la-foi_4834205_3232.html (access 5-1-2018)

¹⁸ Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Wake-up Call for Honesty and Change*. St.Martin's Press, 2004.

¹⁹ On the idea that the consensus of the umma is infallible cf. following hadith:

Consensus constitutes shar'i proof, because it is based on the idea that the ummah as a whole is infallible and that it cannot agree on misguidance. This is proven by the texts of the Sunnah. At-Tirmidhi (2167) narrated from Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Allah will not cause my ummah - or the ummah of Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) - to agree on misguidance."

In: *Islam Question and Answer 202271: Consensus (ijmaa') and analogy (qiyaas) and their application in the modern context*. <https://islamqa.info/en/202271> (access 5-1-2018)

keeps open its own ambiguity.²⁰ In fact the Qur'an is full of openings and questionings. God's ultimate truth remains hidden to fundamentalists no less than to us.

Manji's subsequent *Allah liberty & love* (2011) shows stronger faith, but still puts primacy of conscience above reputation. According to Manji, God has shown His trust in us by sending us into the material world. The question is no longer: "Do you have faith in Allah?" but "What are *you* doing to deserve Allah's faith in you?" Like Iranian revolutionary Ali Shari'ati before her, Manji proposes to read the Qur'an as a liberation treatise. How to do that? Whenever she is attacked for her opinions, her answer is: "...you assume I seek your approval. I don't. The only approval that matters to comes from my conscience and my Creator."²¹ One cannot deny her an immense dosage of courage to challenge taboos. Nevertheless, moral fortitude in daring to resist the conservative majority and its fifth column in the West is an attitude rather than a theory. Manji criticizes her own Islamic community for not referring to God as universally loving. She rejects multiculturalism and relativism: if the appeal to "cultural authenticity" is sufficient reason to demand respect for the norms of an ethnic or religious (say, Islamic) minority, what then about the weaker members of that group? Politically correct privileges permit a tribal Islam (which for Manji is not the true religion) to oppress concrete Muslims. Manji calls for Muslims to emancipate themselves from their patriarchal mentality - a sick shame-based Middle Eastern culture of groupthink and group honor conditioned on women's oppression. Faith and emancipation, far from excluding one another, may strengthen each other!

Predictably, Manji's well-intentioned positions provoked a good deal of commotion. Malaysia has banned her latest book. In Indonesia her lectures have led to violent rioting.²² At her presentation in Amsterdam in 2011 extremists demanded her execution.²³ But these and similar incidents are in fact proof of how much Islam is in need of reform! That intellectuals such as Manji, Salman Rushdie, Ayaan Hirsi Ali or Ibn Warraq need police protection in itself illustrates the religion's totalitarian drift. In turn Islam's frequent absence of liberty of thought and tolerance is grist to the Islamophobes' mill. Nor is it incidental that most Islamic reformers may live and work in the West alone. Most texts of critical Muslims are published in English or French before appearing in any other language (many never make it to Arabic). Despite the occasional "politically correct" censure and even censorship, on balance the West remains far more hospitable to reform-minded Muslims than the Middle East.

²⁰ Qur'an 3:7: "He is the One Who has revealed to you the Book. Some of its verses are decisive - they are the foundation of the Book - while others are allegorical. Those whose hearts are infected with disbelief follow the allegorical part to mislead others and to give it their own interpretation, seeking for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah. Those who are well grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in it; it is all from our Lord." None will take heed except the people of understanding." *The Qur'an in English Translation*. Complete in electronic format with historical background. Revised ed., May, 2011. Adapted and presented by MidEastWeb for Coexistence. In:

<http://www.mideastweb.org> (access 4-1-2018)

²¹ Irshad Manji, *Allah, Liberty & Love*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2011. Electronic edition location 118 of 243 [accessed 5-1-2018]

²² "Irshad Manji book tour in Indonesia runs into trouble with Islamic 'thugs'". In: *National Post* (Canada) 10-5-2012: <http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/irshad-manji-book-tour-in-indonesia-runs-into-trouble-with-islamic-thugs> (access 4-1-2018)

²³ "Sharia 4 Belgium disrupts Irshad Manji" [Netherlands, December 2011. In: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJS6IypEVR8>

(3) Pakistani British **Maajid Nawaz** represents a third type of reformer, and perhaps the most promising: the ex-terrorist! Threatened by English neo-Nazi hooligans, Nawaz found as a young outsider his protective identity in Hizb al-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), an Islamist sect aspiring, just like IS, to universal caliphate. His activism landed him in an Egyptian cell. Among torture, mistreatment but also conversations and readings, he reached the insight that violent jihad is not the straight path. After his release and back in the United Kingdom, Nawaz founded the Quilliam Foundation, named after a 19th century British convert to Islam.²⁴ Quilliam attempts to counteract radicalization of young Muslims. Nawaz knows by experience that behind any conversion lies hidden a story of grievances smartly exploited by a recruiter. Once the recruiter carries the candidate Islamist over the critical threshold, the latter will interpret every frustration – his own and that of the entire *umma* – through the group’s ideological filter. Although transitioning from sectarian to supporter, and from supporter to practitioner of terrorism implies a road not taken most times, viable alternatives may come too late for the radicalized person.

White racists drove Nawaz in the jihadists’ arms. However, Nawaz warns that not only the Far Right is the enemy of Muslim minorities. “Regressive” Leftist intellectuals who on behalf of a fetishized “cultural authenticity” lock Muslims in their own community, may be no less threatening.²⁵ Progressive Western intellectualdom has not been a friend of progressive Muslims. True, the Left defends “its” Muslim minorities, yet in doing so it sacrifices vulnerable minorities within that minority – women, homosexuals, and ex-Muslims – to the totalitarian and often lethal delusions of fundamentalists. Well-meaning Westerners should support Islamic reformers rather than – out of a mistaken fear of coming across as disrespectful to Islamic culture – quarantine them as “inauthentic” or “contaminated”.

Islamic theology has not always been as rigid as it is today. A rationalist current defeated a little over a thousand years ago has adherents until today. The Mu’tazilites held that while revelation may come from God, whatever men make of it is never more than that: a human work. In their vision of the “created Qur’an”, there cannot exist, therefore, one holy book with one infallible and forever untouchable exegesis. In our day Soroush defends a similar attitude. Many progressives follow him. In view of our limited human wisdom, they affirm, extremist interpretations of Islam that lead to jihadism cannot prove that they are better than others. Nawaz insists that in the absence of fixed criteria to establish the superiority of any specific reading, pluralism is the only way forward. Democracy and secularism will unavoidably grow out of it.

But, one might object, does that not imply that all interpretations are equally right? If no point of view is correct, is that not also true of *this* point of view? From within such relativistic reasoning, who is to say that Islamic fundamentalists have *not* got it right? Might not moderation stem from extra-religious, *a priori* political or cultural attitudes which the moderate believer tries to bolster with scriptural arguments (which, given the text’s polyvalent character, may always be found)? Like with their jihadi counterparts, may

²⁴ Maajid Nawaz, *Radical: My journey from Islamist extremism to a democratic awakening*. W.H. Allen, 2012.

²⁵ Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*. Harvard University Press, 2015, 1st.

one not assert that reformers are conflicted within themselves, giving a religious varnish to their doubts? Refreshingly, Nawaz does not shirk such scepticism. He favors dialogue with adherents of other religions and atheists, but without sounding the usual defensive tune. Of course, colonialism has “something” to do with the emergence of Islamism: yet there plenty of internal factors too. Much criticism of Muslims’ behavior, Nawaz admits, is justified: it is dumb to leave Islam bashers the monopoly of it.

Perspective

Few will doubt that activists such as an-Na’im, Manji, and Nawaz wage a crucial battle. Whether they skate on thin theological ice is another question. To more conservative critiques, the reformers’ analyzes are superficial and scandalous. Not all Qur’an verses lend themselves to modern rereadings, and the Book does include bellicose expressions moderates may find hard to cope with. How is it possible that the Sword Verse condemns to death pagans while elsewhere the Qur’an declares that “there is no compulsion in religion”?²⁶

To condemn as un-Islamic any terrorist violence that cloaks itself in the mantle of Islam is necessary, but also easy and insufficient. To “read the Qur’an with one’s own eyes and come to one’s own conclusions” may just as well legitimize jihadist readings. Moderates seem to more credence to the soft theoretical Islam than that of its far too often cruel practice. It is sometimes suggested that jihadis are nihilists, or psychoaths. More often though, terrorists appear to act rather rationally according to the demands of their own specific conscience. The key question is thus: who do liberal Islamic thinkers and doers represent? What is their influence? How strong is the practical significance of libertarian Muslims? Do they point to an alternative strategy, or do they live in a bubble of illusion?

We may compare such doubts with those other (and better known) criticisms that address Israel and Palestinians. I once devoted the best part of my energies to fostering dialogue between both contending groups. Twenty years down the line, the conflict is more hopeless than ever. In retrospective, doubt seems legitimate: what have a multitude of encounters, working committees, demonstrations and solidarity meetings yielded? Did their sum total contribute anything at all? However - and this is crucial -, the fact that the net result of an idealistic endeavor has been negative, does prove neither that it had to be thus nor that the effort should from a moral or religious point of view therefore not have been undertaken. Through terror and bloodshed, Arab and Jewish radicals have unleashed a vicious circle of violence and counterviolence. The once “Peace Camp” is nowadays reduced to a pitiable collection of disappointed elderly. Was this outcome predestined? And will a similar disillusionment await the idealistic reformers of Islam?

The truth is that the disastrous turn of events that unfolded, though always a possible pessimistic scenario, was never a foregone conclusion. Thanks to the peace activists in the Israel-Palestine conflict, in the best years perhaps several percents of both populations were, in one way or the other, in contact with each other: a vanguard aware that its counterpart “on the other side” comprised people who were their equals

²⁶ Qur’an 2:256: “There is no compulsion in religion. True guidance has been made clearly distinct from error. Therefore, whoever renounces ‘Taghut’ (*forces of Satan*) and believes in Allah has grasped the firm handhold that will never break. Allah, *Whose hand-hold you have grasped*, hears all and knows all.” (translation in <http://www.mideastweb.org> (access 4-1-2018))

with comparable frustrations, and with shared hopes. Only extreme violence succeeded in blowing up these laboriously constructed bridges. One Hamas suicide attack or one extremist settler outrage did not do the job: no less than hope itself, despair needed a complex confluence of unrepeatable circumstances to break this hope, and convince majorities that “the other” on the far side of the wall really meant one’s destruction... that hope was no more than an irresponsible illusion. In Israel extremists have captured Zionism from within, and in Palestine moderate nationalists lost ground to their more radical brethren. These outcomes corresponded to no historical “law” but resulted from internal struggles which might just as well have been won. Maybe it is not too much to hope that a parallel openness of outcome, and concomitant potential impact of human agency, is also valid for the struggle between Islam and the West?

If so, then the untractable conflict about the Promised Land may hold lessons for the wider antagonism between Muslims and Westerners. For is “Islam and the West” not “Jews vs. Arabs” enlarged a hundredfold, with both sides convinced they have justice on their side, and the other side not to be trusted? In both conflicts, the extremes try to pull the mass of doubters to its camp: on the one hand, radicals in one’s own community claim that to survive “we must deal much more forcefully with the enemy”. On the other, the positive but sometimes ingenuous “soft forces” posit that the adversary cherishes its own and no less persuasive narrative, and that only by learning to walk in the despised other’s shoes may we together avert catastrophe. In between both stand, among Muslims and among non-Muslims, the large and undecided middle groups. The wager of the “evil forces” is through (reciprocal) terror to unleash such a massive backlash as to tear apart and pit against each other populations fated to live together. Globalization has shrunk our world, and it is too small now for any religious or civilizational apartheid.

Islamist and Islamophobe extremists, however, continue to believe in their backward-looking utopia of either supremacy or segregation. Of their intent we are witnessing ever clearer omens. For this is terrorism’s iron logic: majorities of both the “old” (ex-)Christian Europe and of Europe’s “new” Muslims would, given the choice, opt to live their own lives in as pleasant as possible a manner. One majority may not be particularly fond of the other, but is not terribly bothered by that other group either. These masses, though wary of the idealistic bridge-builders, do not necessarily support playing hardball with their neighbors. Only when this large middling group feels threatened in its fundamental security, will it cut its losses and accept to seize the rifle. These social dynamics we see at work in Europe are probably not so different from those in America, Russia, India or Africa.

The deeper the polarization, though, the worse the risk of antagonism exacerbating even further. Extremists cannot be defeated by force alone. Reformers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, hope and commit to strengthen the social basis to withstand extremist violence. Not until that has paid off enough times will a more positive growing-together have a chance. Is that utopian? Perhaps. Unless we try we shall never know.

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