Islam and Modernity:
Muslim Intellectuals Respond

Edited by John Cooper, Ronald Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud. I.B. Tauris, 1998. 228 pp.

The relation between Islam and modernity is a controversial topic and draws the attention of both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. *Islam and Modernity* brings together the ideas of a number of contemporary modernist and liberal Muslim thinkers and examines their ideas, which attempt to respond to the challenges of the postcolonial situation. The book comprises a collection of articles that analyze the thought of a wide variety of figures from North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Iran, and India and from both Sunni and Shi'i backgrounds. In so doing, it attempts to present a new "map" that goes beyond the usual categorization of Islamic thought according to area, language, or school of thought. For the most part, these thinkers postdate the early wave of "modernist" thinkers, such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, and often differ from them in their thought — particularly in their approach to the Qur'an, their evaluation of Islamic law, and their ideas on the connection between Islam and politics.

In his introduction, Derek Hopwood raises the central issue of the book, which is how change can be integrated into society and particularly how the challenges of modernization can be integrated into Muslim societies. He argues that change is caused by a variety of factors but that tension occurs when a traditional society is challenged by the outside world, or when attempts are made to modernize it from within. In the Islamic world, for example, it was the European influence, through the experience of colonization, that came to challenge the established ideas and customs, and raised the issue of "modernity" in the minds of intellectuals. Hopwood also tries to make a distinction between "modernization" and "modernity." Whereas "modernization" refers to the artifacts of modern life (transport, communication, industry, technology, etc.) and is the general term used for the political and cultural processes initiated by the integration of new ideas and new economic systems, "modernity" is a system of thought and a way of living in the contemporary world that is open to change.

In the first chapter, Javed Majeed explores some appropriations of European modernity that appear in late nineteenth century Urdu literature and focuses on the work of two of the main proponents of the Aligarh Movement, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) and Altaf Hussain Hali (1837–1914). The aim of the Aligarh Movement was to enable the Muslim Urdu-speaking elite, which it represented, to adjust to the realities of British power after the suppression of the Indian rebellion of 1857. Sayyid Ahmad Khan played a central role in the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 and was a key figure in defining "Islamic modernism" in India.

The article also analyzes the ideas of Altaf Hussain Hali, whose biography of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and poetic meditation on the rise and fall of Islamic civilization (which includes a reflection on European modernity and its consequences for the Muslim community) provide an interesting instance of a response to, and appropriation of, modernity. Unlike most commentators who tend to concentrate on how Islamic modernism absorbed or imitated European modernity, Majeed shows how despite Hali and Sayyid Ahmad Khan's attempt to "Islamicize" the narrative of European modernity, they rooted it in the Muslim/Indian context. And he stresses that it is only by understanding the societies and cultures that were part of the European empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that one can truly apprehend the contradictions presented by European modernity.

In the second chapter, John Cooper introduces the thought of Iranian scholar Abd al-Karim Soroush and his controversial contribution to the debate on how modernization can be accepted within a religious context. The main thrust of Soroush's argument is his attempt to situate the religious sciences within the larger framework of human knowledge, and in particular within the context of philosophy and the natural and social sciences. His ideas, especially in the context of present-day Iran, offer a striking and contemporary locus in which to observe how the epistemic realm is closely intertwined with religion and politics. Comparing him with other Shi'i Iranian intellectuals whose standing as respected clerics allowed them to be even more outspoken than Soroush, Cooper touches upon the very sensitive relation between the "intellectual" and the "cleric" in an Islamic society (due to the basic dichotomy between the religious and the secular) and suggests that it is precisely in this relation that the key for positive progress and change lies.

Andreas Christmann sheds light on the life and work of the contemporary Syrian Islamic scholar and religious leader, Shaykh Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti. He belongs to a very small group of Islamic scholars who were able to be religious leaders under secular regimes, having constantly to mediate between the Islamists and the regime. Al-Buti favored a modern, moderate, nonviolent, and self-conscious Islam, where religious and social affairs are rationally determined, and he emphasized principles of solidarity, mutual social responsibility and social justice. It is interesting to see how, like Muhammad al-Ghazali of Egypt, for instance, he maneuvered within the margin of freedom offered by the state to put across a message of enlightened Islam that did not necessarily adopt the values and ideas of Western modernity.

In the next article, Nadia Abu Zahra presents the ideas of the contemporary Egyptian liberal writer, Husayn Ahmad Amin, which she bases on three books he published in the early eighties on Islam in the modern age. His message is essentially about the necessity of joining the global age and benefiting from Western cultures and ideas, as well as critically reading Islamic history and being prepared to reform the Shari'ah. Unfortunately, he contradicted himself several times, and Abu

Zahra fails to place his ideas in their political context although the importance of his work is directly related to the period in which he wrote because the eighties were years of fierce confrontation between the regime and the militant groups. Like other writers such as the late Farag Fouda, Nour Farahat, and M.S. Ashwamy, Husayn Ahmad Amin was a figure of moderate/modernist Islam in Egypt. However, their relationship with the regime, which guaranteed their access to the media, also affected their cultural and political position. Because of this and the fact that they were much celebrated in the West where their writings were translated and thoroughly studied, it would have been relevant to see how far their alienation inside their country, while being welcomed in the West, could have influenced their thought.

In chapter five, Mohamed Mahmoud studies the modernist project of the Sudanese Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, who has drawn the attention of academic circles interested in Islamic reform and liberal thought. Indeed, he is one of the founders of the Republican Party (which has faced fierce hostility from both the religious establishment and the Muslim Brothers) and was twice condemned of apostasy — the last of which resulted in his execution in 1985. According to Mahmoud, Taha's brand of Islamic modernism is unique in that it synthesizes many strands of thought, from Sufism to evolutionism, liberalism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. The article discusses in particular Taha's controversial theory of "the second message of Islam" in which he distinguishes between the Makkan and Madinan revelations, placing the latter in a subsidiary status, which implied also challenging the established Islamic rules derived from them, such as those on jihad, slavery, capitalism, and gender. Unfortunately, Mahmoud yields to the tendency to overpoliticize Taha's ideas, turning him into a martyr of freedom of thought, and fails to mention the fact that describing the Qur'anic verses revealed in Madina as "subsidiary" and "irrelevant" is a major criterion of apostasy in all Islamic schools of jurisprudence. Furthermore, identifying Taha's project in the final statement of the article as "one of the outstanding projects of Islamic modernism" clearly demonstrates what many intellectuals fear: that to be willing to consider the challenge of basic Islamic beliefs is the sign of ultimate devotion to "modernity."

In chapter six, Ronald L. Nettler studies the ideas of the contemporary Tunisian Muslim intellectual Mohamed Talbi, who is a prolific writer on modern Islam and interreligious affairs. Although Talbi admitted being influenced by Western thought, and some German theologians in particular, many of his ideas are rooted in traditional Islamic thought, and Nettler remarks on their similarities with Sufi and Mu'tazili ideas. In particular, Talbi addresses the relation between religion and social life in Islam and discusses topics such as the interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah within their historical context and religious epistemology, as well as broader issues such as women's rights, pluralism, and democracy in modern Islamic societies.

In chapter seven, Abdou Filali Ansari examines the paradoxes of the relation between Islam and modernity in the eyes of intellectuals like Mohamed Abed Jabri who want to modernize/secularize Islam rather than search for common ground. He especially tries to see whether modern rationality can shape a new religiosity. It could have been even more interesting to consider whether religion(s) can shape modernity.

Unlike the preceding chapters, the last two articles are original texts. The first is by Mohammed Arkoun who writes about Islam, Europe, and the West, offering an agenda for the intervention of critical thought in the historical development of Mediterranean societies as they represent the locus of the interaction between the three religions, as well as between Europe and the Middle East. And finally, in the second, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid covers some aspects of Qur'anic poetic language, the expression of God's names and attributes in particular, and discusses the impact of such linguistic exposition on Islamic thought.

Several basic assumptions are made throughout this volume on the relation between Islam and modernity. The first assumption is that the confrontation with the West during the period of colonization was the major cause for reform in the Muslim world. However, various other studies have challenged this idea and shown that Islamic societies witnessed currents of renewal and reform from within *before* being colonized. One can refer in particular to the writings of Mohamed Mahmoud Shaker in Arabic and Peter Gran in English. The second assumption is related to the nature of modernity and its two main tenets, namely, the inevitability of progress and the power of human reason, which implies that there is, at the heart of modernity, a principle of unilinear historical development which rejects the past. This is very important because it means that in the case of Islam, where the past is linked with a revealed book that has an absolute/transcendental legacy, and a human/prophetic experience that remains a reference for all generations to come, a conflict is bound to arise when an Islamic society is faced with modernity.

The declared aim of the book is "to dispute the widespread views of modern Islam as essentially political." Such a distinction is questionable, however, as political groups were never totally neutral regarding either the traditions or the theoretical critical perspective of the West. And similarly, the so-called "modernist" Muslim thinkers were never detached from the politics and power conflicts in their societies. This intentional marginalization of the political resulted, for instance in Majeed's article, in his explicit choice not to address Khan and Hali's rhetoric regarding the Muslim identity in India, but rather to concentrate on the political context and political affiliations of both figures and to see how these can explain the construction of their discourse around specific topics.

Hopwood's description of some thinkers as "more moderate" in comparison to others like the Muslim Brothers or Sayyid Qutb, who are considered exclusively political because of their critical views of the West, is unfortunately a well-estab-

lished approach. Indeed, such descriptive reductions make their ideas irrelevant to Western thought and encapsulates them in a partial area-specific domain that is only of interest to Orientalists or experts. The Islamic discourse, theory, and analytical paradigms are not considered valid in themselves or even seen as useful additions to the Western critical discourse on modernity, whereas Western views about religion or social, political, and economic topics are applied generally to all societies and are accepted as an appropriate approach to understanding Islamic societies.

It would be possible to bridge the gap by redefining the problematic as being between modern secularism and transcendental humanism, instead of between Islam and modernity, as this would allow a different approach that could include the views of Islamist figures who are otherwise being marginalized.

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