



## Liberal Islam: Prospects and Challenges

By Charles Kurzman\*

*The author suggests that there is an important and growing group in Middle Eastern Islam which advocates liberal solutions to the problems of religion and society. Professor Kurzman outlines the different approaches of these thinkers and the reasons for the rise of this school of thought in recent years. For other articles on the political debate within Islam, see Emanuel Sivan, "Why Radical Muslims Aren't Taking Over Governments," MERIA Journal, Vol. 2, No. 2 (March 1998) and also Ali R. Abootalebi, "Islam, Islamists, and Democracy," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 1999).*

Although the focus of research and public perception in the West has been on radical Islamic thought and movements, many Muslims adhere to principles which could be described collectively as "Liberal Islam." This refers to interpretations of Islam that have a special concern regarding such issues as democracy, separating religion from political involvement, women's rights, freedom of thought, and promoting human progress. In each case, the argument is that both Muslims and religious piety itself would benefit from reforms and a more open society. (1) These attitudes parallel those of liberalism in other cultures and also of liberal movements in various religious faiths.

It is quite possible that these tendencies will grow more important in the future, perhaps even coming to be the dominant orientation in the years to come. Such a trend could happen because of local factors, modernization and development in Islamic societies, and reasons similar to those that brought about such an evolution in the West.

### THE TROPES OF LIBERAL ISLAM

Liberalism in the Islamic world and liberalism in the West may share common elements, but they are not exactly the same thing. They may both support multi-religious co-existence, for example, but go

about it in different ways. Within the Islamic discourse, there are three main tropes that I call:

- (a) the "liberal shari`a"
- (b) the "silent shari`a"
- (c) the "interpreted shari`a"

Shari`a is the body of Islamic guidance and precedent that has been handed down from the time of the Prophet Muhammad in 7th-century Arabia.

The "liberal shari`a" argues that the revelations of the Qur'an and the practices of the Prophet command Muslims to follow liberal positions. For example, in the case of Ali Bula (Turkey, born 1951) quotes Sura 109, Verse 6 of the Qur'an: "To you your religion, to me my religion." He goes into great detail describing the "Medina Document," a treaty signed by the Prophet Muhammad with the Jewish tribes of Medina in the first moments of the Islamic era: "The urgent problem of the day was to end the conflicts and to find a formulation for the co-existence of all sides according to the principles of justice and righteousness. In this respect, the Document is epochal....A righteous and just, law-respecting ideal project aiming for true peace and stability among people cannot but be based on a contract among different groups (religious, legal, philosophical, political etc.)....This is

a rich diversity within unity, or a real pluralism." (pages 170-174)

Chandra Muzaffar (Malaysia, born 1947) quotes Sura 49, Verse 13: "O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other, not that ye may despise each other." (page 157) Mohamed Talbi (Tunisia, born 1921) quotes Sura 5, Verse 48: "To each among you, have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. And if God had enforced His Will, He would have made of you all one people." (page 164) Hostile and discriminatory forms of inter-religious relations, according to this trope, are un-Islamic. In the words of Subhi Mahmassani (Lebanon, born 1911): "There can be no discrimination based on religion in an Islamic system." (page 23)

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The second trope, the "silent shari`a," holds that coexistence is not required by the shari`a, but is allowed. This trope argues that the shari`a is silent on certain topics-not because divine revelation was incomplete or faulty, but because the revelation intentionally left certain issues for humans to choose.

For example, Humayun Kabir (India, 1906-1969) argues that the precedent of the early period of Islam does not apply automatically to later periods: "The situation changed as the Muslim empire spread rapidly through large areas of Asia and many different peoples were brought within its fold. Many practical problems arose and

Muslim political thinking had to find a place for non-Muslim subjects in a Muslim State. ...[In India, today, for example,] Muslims have condemned compulsion in religion and admitted that different religions must be given due respect." (pages 148, 152)

Syed Vahiduddin (India, born 1909) quotes the same Qur'anic verse as Mohamed Talbi: "In a pluralistic and multi-religious society one cannot do better than to ponder on the Qur'anic vision of human conflicts: To every one of you we have appointed a right way and open path. If Allah had willed, He would have made you one community...." (Sura 5, Verse 48) But Vahiduddin interprets this verse within the context of the changing needs of an evolving Islamic community: the late 20th century, he writes, is a period, "When Muslims are tempted to take an extremely static view of religion. Their preoccupation with issues which are not of capital importance has made them uncompromising not only in inter-religious dialogue but also in inter-Islamic dialogue." (pages 22-23)

Similarly, Abdurrahman Wahid (Indonesia, born 1940), leader of the world's largest Islamic organization, calls the 1945 Indonesian constitution better suited than an exclusively Islamic state for the particularly multi-cultural setting of contemporary Indonesia. "[T]here is a need for steps to be taken to resist the deterioration of relations between the different religions and faiths in Indonesia," he writes, and the first of these steps is the defense of democratic freedoms: "First of all, efforts to restore the attitude of mutual respect among people from different faiths should be based on the fundamental legal principles of freedom of speech (even for very small minority groups), the rule of law and equality before the constitution." (3)

The first trope of liberal Islam holds that the shari`a requires democracy, and the second trope holds that the shari`a allows democracy. But there is a third trope that takes issue with each of the first two. This

trope is "interpreted Islam." According to this view, "Religion is divine, but its interpretation is thoroughly human and this-worldly." (Abdul-Karim Soroush, Iran, born 1945) (page 246):

"The text does not stand alone, it does not carry its own meaning on its shoulders, it needs to be situated in a context, it is theory-laden, its interpretation is in flux, and presuppositions are as actively at work here as elsewhere in the field of understanding. Religious texts are no exception. Therefore their interpretation is subject to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions enquiring them ....We look at revelation in the mirror of interpretation, much as a devout scientist looks at creation in the mirror of nature ... [so that] the way for religious democracy and the transcendental unity of religions, which are predicated on religious pluralism, will have been paved." (pages 245, 251)

Farid Esack (South Africa, born 1959), cites the words of `Ali ibn Abi Talib, fourth caliph and son-in-law of the Prophet: "this is the Qur'an, written in straight lines, between two boards [of its binding]; it does not speak with a tongue; it needs interpreters and interpreters are people." Esack translates this into contemporary terms: "Every interpreter enters the process of interpretation with some preunderstanding of the questions addressed by the text-even of its silences-and brings with him or her certain conceptions as presuppositions of his or her exegesis." Esack's pre-understandings emerge from the multi-religious struggle against apartheid in South Africa. He argues that this commitment resonates with the spirit of early Islam, when an "emerging theology of religious pluralism was intrinsically wedded to one of liberation." (4)

Similarly, Hassan Hanafi (Egypt, born 1935) wrote: "There is no one interpretation of a text, but there are many

interpretations given the difference in understanding between various interpreters. An interpretation of a text is essentially pluralistic. The text is only a vehicle for human interests and even passions. ... The conflict of interpretation is essentially a socio-political conflict, not a theoretical one. Theory indeed is only an epistemological cover-up. Each interpretation expresses the socio-political commitment of the interpreter." (page 26)

Amina Wadud-Muhsin (United States, born 1952) argues in a similar vein that "when one individual reader with a particular world-view and specific prior text [the language and cultural context in which the text is read] asserts that his or her reading is the only possible or permissible one, it prevents readers in different contexts from coming to terms with their own relationship to the text." (page 130)

Abdullahi An-Na'im (Sudan, born 1946) said: "there is no such thing as the only possible or valid understanding of the Qur'an, or conception of Islam, since each is informed by the individual and collective orientation of Muslims...." (5)

This third trope suggests that religious diversity is inevitable, not just among religious communities but within Islam itself.

## THE SOCIAL LOCATION OF LIBERAL ISLAM

Few if any of the authors quoted above have read one another's work. These liberal positions appear to be emerging independently throughout the Islamic world. This simultaneous appearance is due to three historic shifts of the past several decades.

### INCREASING EDUCATION

### ADVANCED

Widespread higher education has broken the traditional religious institutions'

monopoly on religious scholarship. Millions of autodidacts now have access to texts and commentaries, such as non-clerics with secular educations: engineers such as Muhammad Shahrour (Syria, born 1938) and Mehdi Bazargan (Iran, 1907-1995); philosophers such as Muhammad Arkoun (Algeria-France, born 1928) and Rachid Ghannoushi (Tunisia, born 1941); and sociologists such as `Ali Shari`ati (Iran, 1933-1977) and Chandra Muzaffar (Malaysia, born 1947).

For example, Fatima Mernissi (Morocco, born 1940), trained in sociology rather than theology, examined the hadith (tradition of the Prophet), "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity!" Consulting a variety of ancient sources, she discovered that the hadith was attributed to Abu Bakra (died circa 671)-born a slave, liberated by the Prophet Muhammad, who rose to high social position in the city of Basra. He is the only source for this hadith, and he reported it 25 years after the Prophet's death. Mernissi suggests that this hadith, though included in Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari's collection of traditions, *Al-Salih* (The Authentic) and widely cited in the Islamic world, is suspect for two reasons.

First, when placed in context, Abu Bakra's relation of the hadith seems self-serving. He was trying to save his life after the Battle of the Camel (December 656), when, to quote Mernissi, "all those who had not chosen to join `Ali's clan had to justify their action. This can explain why a man like Abu Bakra needed to recall opportune traditions, his record being far from satisfactory, as he had refused to take part in the civil war. ... [Although] many of the Companions and inhabitants of Basra chose neutrality in the conflict, only Abu Bakra justified it by the fact that one of the parties was a woman." (pages 116-117)

Second, Abu Bakra had once been flogged for giving false testimony in an

early court case. According to the rules of hadith scholarship laid out by Imam Malik ibn Anas (710-796 A.D.), one of the founders of the science of hadith studies, lying disqualifies a source from being counted as a reliable transmitter of hadith. "If one follows the principles of Malik for fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence], Abu Bakra must be rejected as a source of hadith by every good, well-informed Malikite Muslim." (page 119)

Thus, in the world of CD-ROMs and global internet access, anyone literate in Arabic with a personal computer, like Mernissi, can investigate the sources of Islamic law and question the reigning interpretations.

## **INCREASED INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

International technologies of communication-newspapers, telegraph lines, and international trade-as well as radio, television, telephones, and the internet, are bringing educated people from around in the world into ever-closer contact. The ideals of Western liberalism, like other Western notions such as nationalism, have entered people's homes around the world. People in Gabon, West Africa, for example, watched the fall of Communism in eastern Europe and started demanding democracy themselves, prompting that country's dictator to comment derisively on the "wind from the east [i.e., the Communist Eastern bloc] that is shaking the coconut trees." (6)

Another example: Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia, born 1939) defends freedom of thought by quoting the famous U.S. judge Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894): "The ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas-that the best test of truth is the power of thought to get itself accepted [in the] competition of the market ..." Madjid goes on to say: "Among the freedoms of the individual, the freedom

to think and to express opinions are the most valuable. We must have a firm conviction that all ideas and forms of thought, however strange they may sound, should be accorded means of expression. It is by no means rare that such ideas and thoughts, initially regarded as generally wrong, are [later] found to be right. ... Furthermore, in the confrontation of ideas and thoughts, even error can be of considerable benefit, because it will induce truth to express itself and grow as a strong force. Perhaps it was not entirely small talk when our Prophet said that differences of opinion among his umma [community] were a mercy [from God]." (page 287)

A further example of how technology is inducing change in the Islamic world is the tremendous Internet activity surrounding the arrest of former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim (born 1947), whose trajectory from youthful Islamist militant to liberal reformist coincided with his increasing use of quotations from William Shakespeare and other cross-cultural sources. Ibrahim's political career began with a communalist Islamism that scapegoated Chinese Malaysians. In recent years, Ibrahim had become an outspoken proponent of multi-religious co-existence, both in Malaysia and at the global level: "The experience of contemporary Islam in Southeast Asia has much to contribute not only to Muslims in other regions but possibly also to the world at large. This is due to the fact that the devout Southeast Asian Muslim practices his religion in the context of a truly multicultural world. Especially in Malaysia, a Muslim is never unaware of the presence of people of other faiths; as friends, colleagues, collaborators, partners or even competitors." (7)

Supporters of Ibrahim's reform movement contributed to international communication through Web sites such as Anwar Ibrahim Online

([http://members.tripod.com/~Anwar\\_Ibrahim](http://members.tripod.com/~Anwar_Ibrahim)), Anwar Ibrahim One (<http://www.anwaribrahim1.com>), Gerakan Reformasi (<http://members.xoom.com/Gerakan>), ADIL (<http://members.easyspace.com/reformasi>), Reformasi Dot Com (<http://www.reformasi.com>, quoting poetry by Rabindranath Tagore), and Ibrahim's wife's official web site, <http://www.anwaribrahim.org>.

Some of these sites registered hundreds of thousands of visitors in two or three months. As one flashing pro-Ibrahim Web site noted in halting English: "Welcome to J's Reformasi Online, the site of the oppressed and depressed!! In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful."

Some countries, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, have tried to block foreign ideas from entering their countries precisely because they fear these sorts of inter-cultural interactions. But blocking foreign ideas, to quote U.S. President Woodrow Wilson out of context, "is like using a broom to stop a vast flood." (8) Few countries will be able to keep up this level of sweeping for long.

## **THE FAILURE OF ISLAMIC REGIMES**

A third factor in the rise of liberal Islam is the failure of alternative ideologies. In particular, there appears to be a growing sense that Islamic regimes have not lived up to their promise. The Sudan and Pakistan, for example, have proved to be no less corrupt after the Islamization of the government than before. Taliban rule in Afghanistan horrifies most Muslims. (9)

The number one disappointment for "fundamentalist" Muslims, however, is Iran. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 raised tremendous hopes among Islamists in Malaysia, Africa, and throughout the Islamic world. Iran was to be the showpiece of the

Islamist movement. For the first time since the seventh century, a truly Islamic society was to be constructed. It has been painful for these people to find that dream unfulfilled.

There are many examples of this painful disillusionment and the liberal outcome that resulted. Consider `Abdul-Karim Soroush, a man who wholeheartedly favored the Islamic Republic in the early years. Soroush participated actively in the revolutionary reorganization of the universities in Iran, which involved getting rid of many fine professors in the name of ideological purity. Yet even this staunch supporter of the Islamic Republic eventually had his doubts. By the mid-1980s he had started to distance himself from official committees on which he had served. By the late 1980s he came to realize that the Islamic Republic was not ushering in a new era of justice and righteousness. Soroush started to criticize the government and began to call for a reinterpretation of Islamic law and for academic and intellectual freedoms that his university reorganization had disregarded in the early 1980s. These themes, along with his impressive erudition and his talent for public speaking, made Soroush one of the most popular public speakers in Iran in the early 1990s. He spoke at mosques and universities and on the radio, always to big audiences. Naturally the Iranian government found his words threatening, and Soroush has since been barred from speaking publicly in Iran. He now speaks outside of Iran, when he is allowed to travel, addressing international audiences, mainly in Europe and North America, stressing the commonality of his views with Western interpretations of religion. But the pain of Soroush's break with the Islamic Republic and his disillusionment are apparently so great that he literally cannot deal with his own former hopes and aspirations. In interviews, Soroush denies that he was a supporter of the Cultural Revolution in Iran or that he was active in the reorganization of

the universities. (10) The Islamic Republic in Iran appears not only to be generating liberal ideas, but may even be erasing the memory of Islamist ideals.

## **CHALLENGES TO LIBERAL ISLAM**

Although there are Muslims who find common ground with Western liberals, liberal Islam is not without its detractors. Some claim that liberal Islam is inauthentic, that it is a creation of the West and does not reflect "true" Islamic traditions. "Authenticity movements" have been increasing globally over the past quarter-century, from religious authenticity movements such as Islamism or the B.J.P. Hindu nationalist party in India, to ethnic authenticity movements such as tribal hostilities that have resulted in gruesome massacres in central Africa. The emphasis on authenticity is not limited to the Islamic world.

One of the crucial characteristics of this renewed interest in authenticity is the idea that one can take a culture and draw a box around it; that a culture can be defined as a discrete entity, separate from other cultures, with well-defined boundaries. In reality, these boundaries are rarely so precise. In Uzbekistan, for example, the government insists that the Now Ruz New Year's celebration was invented in Central Asia, not in Iran-as if cultural practices would be less valuable if they were imported from elsewhere.

The flip side of this increasing need for cultural ownership is a flurry of criticisms against things or people for not being authentic enough. Because liberal Islam shares concerns with Western liberalism, critics claim, it must not be a valid interpretation of the religion-if X is Western, it cannot be Islamic. This binary opposition ignores the tremendous history of cultural borrowings and influences that

permeated the supposed border over the centuries.

If the first charge is that liberal Islam is inauthentic, and therefore somehow wrong, the second charge argues that liberal Islam should not be tolerated whether or not it is wrong. For example, Gai Eaton, a British Muslim, calls liberal Muslims "Uncle Toms." (11) ("Uncle Tom" is a derisive term used by African-Americans to describe a Black person who is grotesquely servile to whites.) In essence, Eaton is calling liberal concerns treasonous to the cause of Islam. Not only are these concerns wrong, according to Eaton's way of thinking, but right or wrong, raising these concerns publicly weakens the Islamic world in its struggle with the West. It is like a team sport, where each side demands loyalty from its members and sees any internal critique, any self-critique, as aiding and abetting the other team.

In Iran, for example, the feeling of being besieged by foreign, especially American, hostility is so strong that in order to survive, politicians must prove that they are not "soft" on the "Great Satan." (12) Iranian politicians who wish to negotiate with the West, or to raise concerns about democracy, human rights, or other issues, are immediately labeled by their political opponents as "soft on Satan." This pattern is so common and so damaging to liberal concerns, that even Iran's moderate president, Muhammad Khatami, engaged in liberal-bashing during his campaign in 1997, perhaps in order to ward off similar criticism of himself. In one speech, on May 4 at Tehran University, Khatami sounded liberal themes such as: "The government should provide a safe environment for the people so that they may express their opinions on internal issues and economic affairs," and "We should study the West, a fountain of all transformations." At the same time, he accused some liberal oppositionists of having "fallen in the lap of foreigners," of

not being a legitimate political party, and of not coming "from inside society." (13)

Western ignorance poses yet another challenge for liberal Islam. For centuries, the West has constructed an image of Islam as "the Other," identifying Islam with its most exotic elements. Islamic faith has been equated with fanaticism, as in Voltaire's *Mahomet, or Fanaticism* (1745). Islamic political authority has been equated with despotism, as in Montesquieu's intentionally redundant phrase "Oriental despotism." And, Islamic tradition has been equated with backwardness and primitiveness, as in Ernest Renan's inaugural lecture at the *College de France* (1862):

"Islam is the complete negation of Europe; ... Islam is the disdain of science, the suppression of civil society; it is the appalling simplicity of the Semitic spirit, restricting the human mind, closing it to all delicate ideas, to all refined sentiment, to all rational research, in order to keep it facing an eternal tautology: God is God." (14)

Aside from bias, Western policy must better understand the distinctions within Islamic movements. An example is the recent history of Algeria. The *Front de Salvation Islamique (FIS)*, was divided into liberal and radical factions. During the elections of late 1991 and early 1992, the liberal wing was in the ascendant; its leaders were setting the group's policy, its candidates were running for office, and it stood a great chance of actually coming to power.

Abbasi Madani, the leader of the liberal faction, made a number of statements aimed at calming the fears of Algerians and Westerners about the intentions of the FIS, such as: "Pluralism is a guarantee of cultural wealth, and diversity is needed for development. We are Muslims, but we are not Islam itself. ...We do not monopolize religion. Democracy as we understand it means pluralism, choice, and freedom." (16) The FIS had won 81 percent of the first-

round elections in December 1991 and was poised to do equally well in the second round in early January 1992 when the Algerian military, supported by France and the United States, canceled the elections, banned the FIS, and arrested its leaders. The result was that the liberals within the Islamic movement were thoroughly discredited for having proposed an effort to win within the rules of democracy. The radical wing prevailed and even murdered liberal Islamic activists who objected to terrorism, such as Mohammad Sa'id and Abderrazak Redjam who were killed in 1995. The Western inability to believe that there might be such a thing as liberal Islam proved a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## CONCLUSION

There is a growing number of Muslims who share common concerns with Western liberalism, one of which is peaceful multi-religious co-existence. There are three Islamic approaches in this context which, while still very much minority views, seem to be growing. In the "liberal shari'a" school, Islamic scholars base their arguments on injunctions in the Qur'an and on precedents from the early years of Islam.

Using an argument that might be called the "silent shari'a," Islamic scholars argue that the shari'a does not speak about certain topics-not because the revelation is incomplete or imperfect, but because these matters have been intentionally left to human invention.

The third approach is the "interpreted shari'a," where Islamic scholars argue that the revelation is divine, but interpretation is human and fallible and inevitably plural.

These liberal approaches to multi-religious co-existence have been stimulated by three historic shifts of the past quarter century: the rise of secular higher education in the Islamic world, which has broken the monopoly of the seminaries over religious

discourse; the growth of international communications, which has made educated Muslims more aware than ever of the norms and institutions of the West; and the failure of Islamic regimes to deliver an attractive alternative.

These liberal approaches face serious challenges, including accusations of treason and inauthenticity, and a Western ignorance about the existence and importance of this internal Islamic debate.

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## NOTES

1. This paper draws and expands on my anthology, *Liberal Islam: A Source-Book* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). All citations refer to this work, unless otherwise noted.
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10. See the internet website devoted to Soroush's thought (<http://www.seraj.org>), and "Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview," in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, translated by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (forthcoming).
11. Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, New York, 1985), page 12.
12. Charles Kurzman, "Soft on Satan: Challenges for Iranian-U.S. Rapprochement," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 1998, pages 63-72
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14. Ernest Renan, *Oeuvres Completes*, (Paris, France: Calmann-Livy, 1947), Vol. 2, page 333.
15. Daniel Brumberg, "Islam, Elections, and Reform in Algeria," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 1991, page 64.