

*Editorial*

## Muslim Renaissance: Challenges in the Twenty-first Century

The last three decades have brought profound changes to how we look at the fundamental notions that define the modern world, such as culture, ideology, religion, reform, and progress. A drastic shift from a bipolar world defined by the rivalry between the liberal West and the communist bloc in the 1980s, to a globalization intent upon breaking both market and cultural barriers in the 1990s, to a new form of polarization driven by religious and cultural exclusivism at the turn of the twenty-first century. Not only has communism succumbed and disappeared as a credible sociopolitical force, but liberalism itself is in retreat even in the United States, the most liberal society of all, giving way to a new tide of conservatism.

Evidently, the tide of conservatism seeking to replace both progressive and revolutionary movements does not bring new hopes of a better future; rather, it seems to be bent on reclaiming old postures of self-righteousness and ethnicity that fueled hatred, international hostility, and wars. Secularist ideologies are giving rise to religious ideologies, as can be seen clearly in almost every culture, whether in the United States, India, or Turkey.

In Muslim societies, religious conservatism has cloaked the Islamic reform movement's forward vision and threatens to roll back its achievements. The reform movement also has been suppressed by the overbearing political regimes ruling the Muslim world. Many people question whether an Islamic renaissance – or a renaissance based on Islamic values – is even possible and, if so, how does it relate to rising conservative and declining modernist ideologies?

## **Renaissance: A Metaphor and Historical Patterns**

Modern European history started with the Renaissance that took place in southern Europe, at the frontiers of cultural exchange between Islam and the West. It was the contrast between “self” and “other” that brought about the first signs of cultural change. For many, this Renaissance is the metaphor and frame of reference that guide our discussion and inspire our imagination.

Speaking of a Muslim renaissance goes far beyond the language of metaphor, though, for it relates to historical patterns of change that can be traced to every known civilization: Sumeria, Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome, as well as Islamic and western civilizations. Those that eventually became universal civilizations all passed through a renaissance of sorts before becoming the great civilization that they are and were.

Today, Muslims live in the modern civilization of the West and yet continue to be influenced greatly by Islamic civilization. Indeed, Islamic civilization, its cultures and accomplishments, are both a source of inspiration and constraint for modern Muslims.

## **Sailing into the Rough Terrain of Social Change**

While the general patterns of cultural and civilizational change are similar, the sequence and character of change are not identical. Contemporary historians, particularly in the Muslim world, describe Islam’s resurgence as a reawakening that began under the rising pressure of European colonialism.

The call of such early Islamic reformists as Jalal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), and Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938) did not lead Muslim societies to liberation and strength; rather, it was followed by a state of oppression and weakness from which the Muslim world has yet to recover. In fact, the reawakening has yet to lead to an environment in which Islam’s universal and sublime values once again can shape and guide the contemporary practices and institutions of Muslims. The modern nation-state’s repressive power in the Muslim world has left no room for such creative reform.

## **Reconciling Islam with Modern Society**

Faced with oppression and a lack of opportunity for creativity and growth, many Muslims left for the West in their quest for academic, spiritual, economic, political, and social growth. The phenomenon of a growing and vibrant Muslim community in the United States is quite recent, and it is too

early to predict the direction in which this almost unprecedented experiment is going. But regardless of its direction, the United States provides a relatively free environment in which Islam can interact with modern society. And herein lies the tremendous responsibility, and possibly the historical meaning, of Muslim Americans. The question Muslim Americans face today has far-reaching consequences: Can they reconcile modern practices and institutions with Islamic values and assumptions?

In the last two or three decades, Muslim Americans have displayed a great zeal and marked ability to build communities and to reassert their Islamic commitments and identities. Islamic centers, schools, and national organizations have mushroomed throughout the country. In many ways, such efforts reflect a remarkable ability to adapt and catch up with a vibrant American society. Then 9/11 came to complicate life for Muslims in the West, but also to bring them closer to achieving their historical role. This tragedy put all Muslim Americans in the spotlight and in the heart of evolving world history. As a result, no longer can they afford to speak to themselves only or to operate in the splendid isolation they enjoyed during the last three decades.

Despite being faced with tremendous challenges, Muslim Americans have unparalleled opportunities to give Islam a new expression, suitable to the age in which they live, and to help modern society overcome its current predicaments.

## **Transcending Islamic Traditionalism and Western Modernism**

Islamic traditionalism permeates the practices and thinking of Muslim societies. Many current Muslim customs and social habits are continuations of historical practices. The core of Islam's message consists of universal values and principles, as well as basic concepts and beliefs: justice, compassion, honesty, cooperation, the equal dignity of human beings, respect for the religious and moral freedom of every person, and so on. These values are abstract concepts that can function only when given a specific interpretation. All interpretations are historically bound, because they are provided by historically bound human beings.

Today, many of the social, economic, and political ideas found in works by early Muslim authors are not suited for nurturing contemporary or future societies, because these ideas dealt with specific historical situations faced by specific Muslim communities. Now, many Muslims

live in modern societies that emerged and have been influenced greatly by a particular historical experience. At the heart of this experience is the process of secularization.

Secularism in the West operates at two levels: political and social. In the United States, political secularism basically means that the state shall neither impose one religion on society nor deny the exercise of religion. In many countries, however, political secularism has taken a militant form. In Turkey, for example, the state has forced women, in the name of liberation, to take off what they believe to be a religiously ordained head cover, and has prohibited the teaching of the Qur'an to children.

Social secularism, defined as the ongoing purging of the religious foundation of social morality, has led to the gradual erosion of social morality. Further, it has, in spite of the efforts of modern secularists, led to the resurgence of religion and its encroachment upon the public sphere. Unfortunately, the brand of religiosity expressed in the public sphere is bigoted and divisive, and reminds us of the religious intolerance of medieval Europe. Recent attacks by such Evangelical ministers as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Franklin Graham are indicative of the type of political desecularization that we are facing. These attacks are obviously political in nature, and are preludes to violations of Muslim rights and calls to violence. And, combined with the views and efforts of the bin Ladens of the world, they can only bring about a meaner and nastier world.

## **Muslim Americans' Place in the Islamic Renaissance**

The historical and geographical positioning of American Muslims demands that they rise to the occasion and provide an alternative to religious bigotry. American Muslims are well situated to bring about a shining and forward-looking model of society in which religion is reconciled with modern society.

In so doing, they can provide a new vision of how Islam can be lived to its fullest extent in modern society, and how religion can be reconciled with contemporary social life without relapsing into medievalism. But for that to happen, Muslims need to meet two conditions: liberate themselves from traditionalism by deepening their commitment to Islam's universal values, and forge ahead in the knowledge that the Islam they love and embrace still has a lot to offer to humanity.