

At the same time, however, current conditions—particularly since September 11—hinder the free expression of Muslim critiques of the West. The emergence of an “Islamically correct” language in mosques, described above, is a good example of the current impossibility of expressing one’s skepticism. Even if this skepticism is expressed indirectly, for example, on issues of family or personal morality, it risks censorship and rebuke. Thus the Algerian imam of Vénissieux, who had spoken in support of polygamy and the stoning of adulterous women, was expelled from the country on April 21, 2004 by the French Ministry of the Interior. (The administrative court of Lyon, however, eventually stayed the expulsion, on the grounds that it had no basis in fact but rather on “general statements resting on subjective opinions.”⁴¹). The Imam’s opinions are no doubt objectionable, and can be subject to both civil disciplinary measures and criminal prosecution; what remains an open question, however, is the way in which his comments were politicized by the Minister of the Interior, who made the decision to deport the Imam on grounds of public security.

We are thus dealing with classic dilemma of the new immigrant, obliged to display a wholehearted embrace of the values of the new political community of which he or she wants to be a part. In other words, the new immigrant must be more enthusiastic about his or her host society than its native inhabitants—all the more so in the unfriendly environment of post-September 11. The result among Muslims in the West is an ambivalence that is neither hypocrisy nor dishonesty, but a means of survival. This ambivalence demonstrates the extent to which Islam remains a alien phenomenon in Western societies. Islam will only cease to be alien once Muslims living in the West are able to express their criticisms of the democratic process, without being accused of disloyalty or being seen as a danger to society.

In this respect, it is interesting to point out that the only criticisms which are accepted, and even expected, from Muslims in the West are those that take issue with Islamic tradition itself. As chapter 9 shows, reformist trends, ranging the spectrum from moderate to radical, are currently beginning to develop within the Islam of the diaspora.

CHAPTER 9

The Reformation of Islamic Thought

In the West, a reformist trend is beginning to emerge in Islamic thought. It is, of course, still very much a fringe movement, and western Muslims remain, by and large, more conservative and more conformist than one might suspect. But it is nevertheless a first effort to break the vicious circle of the apologist mindset. The trend is particularly visible in the United States, largely due to the concentration there of Muslim elites from a variety of countries and cultures.

There are also efforts to reform Islamic thought, of course, within the Muslim world. Indeed, most of the chief reformist thinkers come from countries of the Muslim world: it was there that they began their studies, and they continue to maintain friendships and associations in their countries of origin. But it is easier for these thinkers to express certain ideas and methodologies in the West than in the Muslim world, for the obvious reason that the West makes specific provisions for the free expression of thought.

Some of the ideas these thinkers present are particular to Islam’s status as a minority culture in the West; others, such as the status of women, human rights, or democracy, have a more universal import and have been subjects of debate and controversy in the Muslim world for decades. We discuss how residence in the West often gives a new dimension to these debates.

The international relevance of any one thinker’s ideas can be measured by such criteria as the number of his works that have been translated into Arabic or other languages, the number of works taught in the universities of the Muslim world, and the thinker’s ties to the Muslim world by professional

affiliations or visits to various institutions in that part of the world. All of the thinkers presented below meet these criteria.¹ But relevance must be measured in two ways: the preeminent thinkers and controversies of the Muslim world must be judged not only in terms of their influence in the Muslim world itself, but also according to their place in the intellectual life of Western Islam. A truly international intellectual community—one that claims members as diverse as Rached Ghannouchi and Abdolkarim Souroush, Fatima Mernissi and Hassan Hanafi—is beginning to take shape. In this chapter, we only discuss thinkers who write and publish in the West.

Reforms in Legal Thought: Minority Rights

Since the 1980s, Muslim settlement in Europe and the United States has given rise to intense debate over the legal conditions connected to minority status. Islamic law initially developed in a context in which Islam was the dominant political culture; reflection on the legal status of minorities was for the Jewish or Christian “Other,” not for the Muslim living in non-Muslim lands. Some interpretations, certainly, came out of the situation of the Christian reconquest of Spain in the fifteenth century. But there was nothing that would truly place in question the *summa divisio* between the *Dar al-Harb* and the *Dar al-Islam*, the Abode of War versus the Abode of Islam, which for centuries has shaped the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.

There are at least six different definitions of the *Dar al-Islam* in Islamic law: Does it refer to the territories in which Islamic law is applied? Is it where Muslims hold political power? Where the governors behave as good Muslims? Complicating the situation, the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence differ in their opinions on the status of the *Dar al-Harb*. The Malekites reject the idea that Muslims can live in the *Dar al-Harb*. The Hanbalis and Shiites tolerate it, on the condition that expatriate Muslims can still observe the Five Pillars of Islam. The Hanafis solve the problem by making a distinction between what is required, what is recommended, what is permitted, and what is forbidden. It is required, for example, for a Muslim to leave the *Dar al-Harb* if his life is in danger or it becomes impossible to practice Islam. On the other hand, a Muslim may remain in the *Dar al-Harb* if he can continue to observe the Five Pillars without difficulty. Hanafis also stipulate that some laws—including those with an ethical character, such as the prohibition against earning interest—can be suspended if one lives outside the *Dar al-Islam*.

Today some Muslims—primarily Wahabis—continue to use the dichotomy *Dar al-Islam/Dar al-Harb* to explain the condition of European

and American Muslims. But there are also those who feel that this dichotomy has become obsolete or inadequate, and seek to replace it—especially the idea of the *Dar al-Harb*—with a different concept. In 1987, Sheikh Faisal Mawlawi, of Beirut, was the first to propose a different way of thinking on this topic. At the UOIF's request, he published a brochure in which he described how the opposition between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* could be fruitfully replaced by an opposition between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Ahd*—the Abode of Accord—or *Dar al-Dawa*—the Abode of Mission or of Invitation to Islam.² (This latter term is a reference to the Mekka period, in which Muslims made up the minority in a society that rejected the Revelation; thus Muslims took upon themselves the responsibility for transmitting Islam's message.) In his writings, Mawlawi begins by questioning the definition of an Islamic State, on the grounds that nowhere today in the *Dar al-Islam* are the Islamic laws respected in their totality. On the status of Muslims in a non-Muslim State, Mawlawi makes it clear that the countries in which Muslims live are not part of the *Dar al-Harb* (the Abode of War), but rather of the Abode of Accord, since the Muslims who live there came on the basis of agreements with their countries of origin. Consequentially, the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are based on a mutual respect for the law of the State—as long as this law does not contradict the dictates of Islamic faith. “Our rights in these countries,” he states, “are the rights that their laws give to us.” Interpersonal relationships in these countries are based on two additional principles: piety (the Muslim must be pious and follow the “straight path”) and justice (injustice is prohibited, even in a conflict with a non-Muslim).

These countries are seen as the “Lands of Mission” (*Dar al-Dawa*): “We are living in the *Dar al-Dawa*, as the Prophet and the Muslims did in Mecca before the Hejira. Mecca was not the *Dar al-Harb*, nor was it the *Dar al-Islam*, but the *Dar al-Dawa*.” Such a view makes it necessary for the Muslim to be welcoming and conciliatory. The idea of the West as a land of Islamic proselytizing is demonstrated in the actions and words of many of the Islamic leaders who hold positions of authority. For the time being, at least, most of the Islamic authorities have shifted their focus away from the enforcing of Islamic law in family or personal life. The emphasis is instead on keeping the Muslim community—particularly the younger generations—to the “straight path,” in light of the dangers posed by a religious, or even an antireligious environment. The concept of “the Abode of Accord” is the expression of Muslims' decision, of their own free will, to settle outside the *Dar al-Islam*, with all the consequences of civil participation and good conduct that this entails.

Rached Ghannouchi is a dissident Tunisian Islamist living in exile in London since the beginning of the 1990s. In his writings, he elaborates upon

the idea of democracy in the context of Islamic philosophy. He holds the position that there is no existing Islamic government worthy of the name, and that Muslims should therefore be pragmatists in their political approach. Citing the list of necessities drawn up by the fourteenth century Andalusian jurist Al-Shatibi—Protection of Faith, Protection of Life, Protection of Posterity, Protection of Property, and Protection of Reason—Ghannouchi considers that all of these conditions are sufficiently fulfilled in the West. There is therefore no reason why a Muslim should not live there. Ghannouchi is also in favor of the sharing of power, and thus of Muslim participation in the democratic process.³

Still others, such as the U.S. resident Taha Al-Alwani, completely reject the traditional opposition of *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*. Their claim largely rests on the Hanafi argument that a Muslim majority does not necessarily entail an Islamic character for a country or a society. They conclude that Islamic principles can still apply outside those lands that have historically been Muslim.

Taha Al-Alwani describes the legal condition of Western Muslims as follows: "The different schools of jurisprudence in Islam have not yet dealt with the situation of the Muslim minority. The only instances that have been discussed have to do with exceptional periods, such as the time in Andalusia, which necessitated an exceptional jurisprudence based on the principle of necessity. Today, the situation is completely different: to be a minority is the norm, not the exception. We must thus settle the question of the relationship between Islamic law and societies that are not governed by Islam. For example, jurists have long regarded it as a problem for a Muslim to acquire citizenship and national status in a non-Muslim country. They believed that it was not possible to be both a citizen of a non-Muslim country and a faithful Muslim. But today, all our efforts are intended to prove the contrary: to understand that citizenship of a non-Muslim country is, in fact, *not* incompatible with Islamic religious observance. The contributions of all the schools of law have proven helpful in legitimating the idea of citizenship, as they have with all the different social and political consequence of the minority condition. My own primary goal is to engage in interpretation that reflects the requirements of life in the United States."⁴ Al-Alwani is currently working on an epistemology of minority rights based on the following three concepts: *tawhid* (unity), *tazkiyya* (purification), and *al-umran* (civilization).

Tariq Ramadan, for his part, rejects the necessity of minority rights law. Instead, he believes that Europe and the United States now constitute part of the Muslim world, and that it is indeed possible to live there according to Islamic principles. He proposes the term "World of Witness (*Shahada*)"

to define this situation, seeing it as one in which the Muslim gives witness—through his behavior and his participation in the institutions of democracy—to his faith and identity as a Muslim. Non-Muslim governments in which Muslims are able to participate democratically, he argues, are more Islamic than authoritarian governments run by Muslims. The electoral structures and the freedom of thought that form the basis of the democratic process are Islamic principles as well, principles that make any theocracy or autocracy unjustifiable.⁵

Deconstructing the Revealed Text

Historical interpretation of the Qu'ran—in which it is treated as a text shaped by its cultural and political circumstances—is still very much an innovation and a taboo within Islam. Fazlur Rahman wrote the pioneering work on this subject, bibliography of which remains fairly limited. Rahman was born in 1919, in the British colony that would later become Pakistan. His academic career brought him to India, England, and eventually, the United States. After teaching in England and Canada, he returned to Pakistan in 1966 to direct the Institute for Islamic Research in Karachi, where his modernist views quickly earned him the opposition of the religious establishment. He subsequently returned to the Western academic world, accepting a chair at the University of Chicago in 1968, where he worked on his reinterpretation of Islam until his death in 1988.

Rahman rejected the middle way of "excusing" or defending certain practices described in the Qu'ran by arguing that they could only be possible in a fully realized Islamic society. Many Islamists—including, for example, the Muslim Brothers—hold this view in regard to certain practices such as corporal punishment. For Fazlur Rahman, however, this kind of practice should be rejected entirely, as it is a product of the societal standards in place at the time of the Prophet, and is thus no longer relevant. He believes that Islam began to decline as soon as the Qu'ranic text was considered as something absolute, independent, and divorced from any historical context. This bias is reinforced by the selective use of verses and *suras*, taken individually and without regard for the meaning of the text as a whole.

In order to counteract this kind of atomistic and anachronistic approach to the revealed Text, Rahman argues for a method of interpretation that would move from the historically particular to the general and from the general back to the particular. This method entails studying the specific historical situations in which the verses of the Qu'ran were revealed, revealing the transcendent and universal aspects of Qu'ranic laws, and reapplying those

laws to present-day situations. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd,⁶ for one example, uses this method in his discussion of dowry practices. He demonstrates that, while providing a dowry for women was a form of progress according to the prevailing social standards of the time of the Prophet, today it is equality between man and woman that is the progressive position.

Mohammed Arkoun, born in Kabylia in 1928 and currently professor of Islamology at the Sorbonne, attempts in his work to construct an Islamic humanism based on a historical analysis of the Qu'ran. A historicist approach would provide a way to think about the Qu'ran beyond the antinomies of secular/Westernized and traditionalist that currently dominate contemporary interpretations. Arkoun joins Abu Zayd in maintaining that it is possible to engage in a historical analysis of the Qu'ran without renouncing its divine source. To support his claims, Arkoun introduces the idea of the difference between the unthought and the unthinkable. Islamic tradition and orthodoxy fall into the former category. Tradition here refers to the series of texts recognized as authentic by the Muslim community, including the *Hadith*, the methodology for interpreting *Shari'a*, and the body of legal texts. Arkoun argues for a historical analysis of these works, as well as of the foundations of Islamic law and religion. He criticizes the idea of a "return to the source," which has become a sort of leitmotif in contemporary Islam and operates as at once a methodology, an epistemology, and a theory of history.⁷

In contrast to Arkoun, the goal of Khaled Abou El Fadl is not to bring the unthinkable or the unthought in Islam to light, but to deconstruct the modes and methods of religious authoritarianism in contemporary Islam. El Fadl, born in 1961 and currently a professor of Law at UCLA, is one of the most prominent figures of the reformist movement in Islam. A Kuwaiti American, he has been an important participant in the ongoing debate within the American Muslim community, particularly after September 11. His strong criticism of conservative and puritanical strains of Islam have earned him several death threats. But it has also allowed him to gain a name for himself in Washington political circles, where he currently sits on a variety of commissions and committees on Islam and human rights. In his book, *And God Knows the Soldiers* (2001), El Fadl attempts to deconstruct the fatwa issued by The Society for Adherence to the Sunna in support of basketball player Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, who refused to stand for the singing of the American national anthem. El Fadl describes how Wahabi thought simply obscures the multiplicity of sources and discussions that make up the richness of Islamic tradition. There is nothing new, of course, in the phenomenon of competing interpretations on the same theme. But the originality of El Fadl's argument is his critique of the abuse of the *usul al fiqh*, the foundations of

Islamic law. In Wahabi thought, the *usul al fiqh* cannot be contested because they come out of the sacred Text. The wearing of *hijab*, for example is—in most contemporary cases, without discussion—placed in the category of fundamental precepts, and is therefore nonnegotiable. El Fadl, in contrast, shows that *hijab* was actually an active subject of debate for the jurists of the classical period: What should one cover? The chest, the hair? Who should cover herself? For example, among other exceptions to the rule, female slaves were not required to cover themselves. El Fadl writes, "The historical setting and the complexity of the early context do suggest that the inquiries into the juristic base of the *hijab* cannot be considered heretical. In this sense, labeling the *hijab* as part of the *usul* and using that label as an excuse to end the discussion on this matter, is obscenely despotic."⁸ El Fadl applies the same kind of deconstruction to the term *maslaha*, or public good, currently often used to justify the authoritarian application of Islamic laws and precepts.

Muslim progressives, with Omid Safi⁹ foremost among them, have the even more ambitious agenda of following up on changes in Islam's ideology with changes in leadership and religious practices.

The Acknowledgment of Secularism

Islam's approach to the concept of democracy was turned upside-down once Muslims began to establish communities in the West. The changes that are currently taking place are even more remarkable in that for the majority of Muslims, the concepts of democracy and secularization are associated with Western domination, both colonial and postcolonial.

This is how Egyptian Islamist Abdulwahab al-Massari describes his view of Western civilization and its problems:

The price of progress, quantification, mechanization, standardization, instrumental value-free rationalization, alienation, the crisis of meaning, the domination of utilitarian values, the spread of moral and epistemological relativism, anomie, disintegration of society, increasing contractualization, the problem of the *Gemeinschaft* versus the *Gesellschaft*, the tightening of the grip of the state over the individual through its various apparati, the hegemony of companies and bureaucracies, the decline of the family, the atrophy of identity, the minimal self, the decentering of man, the rise of anti-humanist philosophies, philosophical nihilism, internationalization or globalization, the subversion of individuality and privacy, the Americanization of the world, Cocacolonization, commodification,

reification, fetishism, the cult of progress, the cult of change and fashion, consumerism, the culture of the disposable-instantaneous gratification, the culture of narcissism, post-ideology, the modern world as an iron cage, the death of God and the death of man, disenchantment of the world, the rise of ethnicity, racism, pornography, deconstruction (and a number of verbs with the prefix "de": dehumanize, debunk, demystify, deconstruct).¹⁰

Today, such a vision of Western culture and political philosophy has been completely destabilized by Muslim intellectuals living in the West. We should first mention that the question of who should rule, over which so much ink has been spilled since the first *salafiyya* is not experienced by European or American Muslims as a major political problem, but rather as an advantage. Second, on the theoretical level of what constitutes "good" government, the old debate about the compatibility between Islamic values and political principles and those of the West has been largely replaced by the ideas of pluralism and tolerance.

In his work, El Fadl distinguishes between God's will and human efforts to articulate this will within the structures of the Law. In his opinion, the idea that God is a kind of legislator of human affairs is, from the standpoint of theology, an indefensible fiction. Justice and mercy are the two Islamic principles that should guide all human efforts in political and collective matters. He further demonstrates how these principles are completely in harmony with the idea of civic responsibility within the democratic system.

El Fadl's research on the compatibility of Islam and democracy follows in the footsteps of Abdolkarim Soroush's thought. Both men emphasize secularization and human rights in their discussion of a new attitude toward democracy. Soroush, an Iranian exile living in the United States, has been at the forefront of the reformist movement in Iranian Islamic thought, and remains part of the Irani religious intelligentsia. He was born in 1945 and studied pharmacology and philosophy in both England and Iran. In Iran, he was a preeminent figure in the first phase of the Islamic regime, sitting on the High Council of Cultural Revolution, from which he later resigned. His critical stances on Islam and politics gradually caused him to be shunned by both the Iranian political and intellectual worlds. In 1999, he came to the United States, teaching at Harvard and Princeton. He currently divides his time between Iran and the United States. His tenure in the United States has enabled him to attract a wider audience, and has given an international dimension to his thinking.

Soroush belongs to that class of reformists who attempt to reconcile Islamic values and Western culture, in contrast to those who adopt one or the

other system exclusively. He bases his ideas on a distinction between religion and knowledge about religion. The latter is the work of human beings, and is thus subject to change and criticism. He wholly rejects the ideological use of Islam, which in his view destroys the complexity of the religion and reduces it to a political tool. The ideological use of religion, according to him, plays into the identity-politics version of Islam, which has come to supplant the true Islam, that is, the Islam of faith and values. Soroush is in favor of democratic rule, which, he says, is the only form of government and the only ethical system compatible with the principles of Islam. Faith and religion can never be the basis of citizenship or political rights; thus the status of religion within society should be independent of both politics and law.

At the same time, however, a Western-style separation of religion and politics is not a realistic option. Soroush's vision of democracy is essentially a plea for equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. His critics have noted the absence of theory and historical perspective in his thought, pointing out that there is no historical example of a society both democratic and religious. It is true that Soroush does not spell out what "a religious democracy" would mean, in terms of either methodology or institutional organization.¹¹

The Question of Human Rights

In its current usage, the term "human rights" has two meanings. The first refers to the various struggles for freedom and social justice that have taken place throughout history. The second is the specific conception of freedom and justice set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (created in 1948) and other international treaties. According to these treaties, these rights are an essential characteristic of every human being, without distinction for religion, culture, race, or sex. The paradigm of the universality of human rights is set down in various national and international treaties, and alludes to the universal character of constitutional rights as they appear in Western democracies. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Convention of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are two examples of international documents that have put this vision into concrete form.

Within the Muslim community, two political and intellectual attitudes have emerged in opposition to this vision. The first is a defensive stance, which consists in the rejection of the very concept of human rights as a foreign product hostile to Islamic tradition. This has been the attitude taken by the first phase of the Islamic regime in Iran, as well as by the Sudanese Nimeiri regime¹² and, most recently, the Taliban. One surprising fact is that

this rejectionist attitude has been strengthened by many Western academic analyses, particularly those coming from so-called postmodern schools of thought.¹³

The second attitude can be called the inclusive attitude;¹⁴ it attempts to claim the concept of human rights as an achievement of Islamic culture. The Islamicization of human rights is particularly noticeable at the international level, where it is transformed into Islamic versions of various treaties, including the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981), a draft of an Islamic Constitution (Al Azhar, 1979), and the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (1993). In each case, Islamic law is the gold standard for the evaluation and inclusion of human rights provisions. As Article 25 of the Cairo Declaration states, "The Islamic *Shari'a* is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification of any of the articles of the Declaration." Despite the statement in Article 1 that all human beings are equal, the Declaration largely maintains the idea that there exist fundamental differences between people. Article 6 presupposes that men have the dominant role in the home: "Woman is equal to man in human dignity and has rights to enjoy as well as duties to perform; she has her own civil entity and financial independence, and the right to retain her name and lineage. The husband is responsible for the support and welfare of the family." Article 10 violates the principle of equality entirely by stipulating, "Islam is the religion of unspoiled nature. It is prohibited to exercise any form of compulsion on man or to exploit his poverty or ignorance in order to convert him to another religion or atheism." Such a statement is in direct contradiction of the principle of equality among religions as it exists in the human rights model.

In the intellectual sphere, the inclusive or Islamicizing attitude avails itself of two types of arguments. First, it plays on the confusion between the two meanings of the term human rights, demonstrating that the different formulations of *Shari'a* have always respected the fundamental character of human rights.¹⁵ Second, it perpetually repeats the following assertions: Divine law comes before human law, Collective rights take precedence over individual rights, and Equality between individuals is conditioned by sex and religious affiliation.

In contrast to this inclusive or apologist ideology, there is another, attitude, more critical and realistic, which is articulated primarily by Muslim intellectuals living in the West. Abdullah An-Na'im is one of the chief figures in the critical discourse on human rights in an Islamic context. Originally from Sudan, he studied at Cambridge University in England and later at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, from which he received his law degree. A disciple of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha,¹⁶ the reformist leader executed by

the Sudanese government in 1985, An-Na'im has taught in the Sudan, Canada, and the United States. He has been active in the struggle for human rights as the long-standing director of Africa Watch, a human rights advocacy group in Washington, and is currently a professor of Law at Emory University.

One of An-Na'im's primary contributions has been to recognize the inherent tension between the human rights model as it has emerged as a result of Western history, and the principles of *Shari'a*. Even if the moral or philosophical bases of human rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are found in many religious traditions, it is still the case that theology often conflicts with this particular model. Thus many of the principles of *Shari'a* have to be reinterpreted before reconciliation and real intercultural dialogue are possible.¹⁷ Certain underlying assumptions of *Shari'a*, such as the inequality of men and women, the unequal status of different religions, and the status of the apostate in Islamic tradition, must all be reexamined in light of the Western conception of human rights.

"Gender Jihad"

It is the discourse on women, above all, that serves as a yardstick for the various interpretations of Islam, from the most reactionary or the most apologist to the most modern. The overwhelming majority of Islamic literature available in the West on the subject of women either defends Islam against attacks by westerners, or acknowledges the problems of certain practices but simply deems them non-Islamic. The use of the term "Islam" without specifying what sources the author is referring to—*Qu'ran*, *Hadith*, *Madhab*¹⁸—exploits people's confusion and ignorance and reinforces the kind of authoritarianism described by Abou El Fadl.

In these works, the prevailing point of view seems to be that while men are naturally superior, women should be treated with lenience and kindness.¹⁹ The conservative slant of this interpretation, favoring the social separation of the two genders, is meant to respond to the anxieties of Muslims living in the modern world, who fear that they will lose their standards of morality. The division of gender roles—between the "public" man and the "private" woman—is a solution that speaks to many believers, especially since the number of converts to Islam, and female converts in particular, is constantly on the rise in both Europe and the United States. The irony of this model, however, is that it is quite a bit dissimilar to the idea of woman as it exists in classical Islamic texts.²⁰ The image of woman as mother and homemaker described by today's conservative literature is a shift in emphasis

from the vision of woman in classical legal tradition. The jurists of the classical period, for their part, focused on a woman's wifely duties toward her husband, particularly her sexual duties.²¹

Increasingly, however, women Muslims are offering interpretations to counter this dominant model. Adopting the feminist approach of the social sciences and cultural studies fields, Azizah al-Hibri and others show how Islamic law has up to now been interpreted in a patriarchal manner. Still others, such as Asma Barlas, maintain that the Qu'ran itself is solidly egalitarian in its positions.²²

Amina Wadud offers one of the most original approaches to the question of gender in the Qu'ran. An African American convert to Islam and professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Virginia, her career is a kind of case study of Western influence on Islamic thought. While many analyses of women's status in Islam, including that of Fatima Mernissi, deal with interpretations of sacred text, taking issue with the patriarchal aspects of religious tradition, Wadud chooses to interpret the Qu'ran directly. Using the technique elaborated by Fazlur Rahman, she has developed a hermeneutics of the Qu'ran by studying the historical context of the revealed Text, the grammatical structure of the Text (How does it express concepts? What words/phrases does it use?), and the vision of the world it presents.²³

In contrast to other feminist approaches to Islam,²⁴ Wadud recognizes that the Qu'ran does indeed make distinctions between men and women, but these distinctions are not, she maintains, essentialized. In other words, they do not presuppose the fixed social and religious gender roles that have been canonized by Islamic tradition. Wadud reopens the debates on the supposed superiority of men over women or the definition of modesty. To accomplish this, she identifies two levels of text in the Qu'ran—the historical and the universal or mega-text—and claims the right to disagree with the text, even as a practicing and believing Muslim, particularly in her discussion of the Qu'ranic verse that allows a husband to beat his wife.²⁵ She also claims the right to wear *hijab* only from time to time, and advocates “gender jihad”: that is, the struggle for equality between the sexes, in the name of God.

Wadud's intellectual stance resonates with the daily aspirations of many Muslim women, especially in the United States, who are demanding to be allowed to hold positions of religious authority. The role of the imam, for one, has become a hotly debated issue among educated Muslim women, who refuse to be led in prayer by a man often less competent than themselves in matters of Islam.

The woman's magazine *Azizah*²⁶—whose motto proclaims, “For the woman who doesn't apologize for being a woman, and doesn't apologize for

being a Muslim”—is the reflection of these discussions. Its French equivalent, *Hawa*, created in 2000, fell far behind in terms of both its longevity and its audience, and went out of circulation completely in 2003. In the same way, the fledgling women's studies groups that have sprung up in several communities, most notably among German converts to Islam, still cannot compare in either depth or intensity to the feminist discourse of the American Muslim community. The proof can be found, for example, in the worldwide popularity of Amina Wadud's book among women Muslims. Her book has been translated into numerous languages, including Arabic, Urdu, and Malay, and she herself is regularly invited to speak at universities and women's associations throughout the Muslim world.

Interfaith Dialogue

Today, the theory of Islam's inherent superiority to other religions is being challenged by the advocates of interfaith dialogue. The trajectory of Ismael Faruqi is typical of this process of understanding. Assassinated along with his wife in 1986 in unclear circumstances, his American career typifies the evolution from militant nationalism to Islamic philosophy. Born in Jaffa in 1921, he served as governor of Galilee until the creation of the State of Israel. He went into exile in the United States and began a career as an academic. Faruqi eventually came to believe in Islam's superiority over other, national and political, ideologies. He graduated with a degree from Al Azhar and received his doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Indiana, taking a post as professor at Temple University in 1968. Inspired by the *salafyya* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Faruqi went on to dedicate his life to the reform of Islam through its integration with Western philosophical and sociological concepts. He was also actively involved in the creation of a number of Islamic organizations: the MSA in 1963, AMSS, American Islamic College, and the IIIT.²⁷ In 1967, his pioneering thesis, *Christian Ethics*, became the first work by a Muslim educated in an American university to analyze the ethical system of Christianity.

Faruqi argues for the necessity of an interfaith dialogue that would preserve each religion's right to internal coherence. No interfaith communication is allowed to violate this internal coherence: in other words, a Christian cannot exhort a Muslim to accept the idea of the Trinity, nor could a Muslim require a Christian to renounce it. Faruqi insists upon the primacy of reason in the analysis of religious belief. In light of this, he considers all those debates in which reason and faith are set up as opposites—such as that between the Mutazilites and the Asharites,²⁸ or between the theologians and

the philosophers—to be overrated. In their place, he argues for an analysis of ethical systems: “Let us drop our old questions regarding the nature of God, which have brought nothing but deadlocks, and let us turn to man, to his duties and responsibilities which are in fact, none other than God’s will. Let God be whom He may, it is not possible, nay necessary, that all men agree to establish divine will first?”²⁹

But this belief in reason as a means to arrive at an interfaith dialogue that would transcend differences in religious doctrine, however, itself contains a number of biases. It assumes, first of all, that the participants in the dialogue will be able to agree on transcendental ethical principles and leave aside their differences of legal and religious practice. Faruqi cannot quite rid himself, furthermore, of the notion of Islam’s superiority *vis-à-vis* other religions, and his argument often seems to be an attempt to convince Christians to adopt the Islamic version of religious history. This is particularly apparent in the distinction he draws between “Christianism” and true Christianity: that is, the ethical principles of Christianity divorced from historical and religious contexts.³⁰ Nonetheless, Faruqi can take credit for having opened up the possibility of de-absolutizing the Islamic message.

This possibility has also been explored by the scholar Fathi Osman. Like Faruqi, he subscribes to movements of progressive *Salafyya* and the Muslim Brothers. Born in Cairo, he received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1976, and served as the editor-in-chief of the London-based magazine *Arabia* from 1981 to 1987. He is currently scholar-in-residence of the Ibn al Khattab Foundation and director of the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World at Los Angeles, after a term as scholar-in-residence at the Los Angeles Islamic Center until 1996. He advocates a dialogical structure for interfaith communication in which the point of view of the other is taken into account, and all different systems of belief are given the opportunity to express themselves.³¹ We should also note here the example of Rifat Hassan, who since 1979 has been an active participant in dialogue between Christians, Jews, and Muslims.³²

The Status of the Apostate

Apostasy is another one of those subjects for which the traditional approach of Islam has been transformed by the phenomenon of Western Islam. Abdullah An-Naim’s position is representative of the majority of critics in Islam today: “Although I know this to be the position under *Shari’a*, I am unable as a Muslim to accept the law of apostasy as part of the law of Islam today. . . . The *Shari’a* law of apostasy can easily be abused and has been

abused in the past to suppress political opposition and inhibit spiritual and intellectual growth. This aspect of *Shari’a* is fundamentally inconsistent with the numerous provisions of the Qu’ran and Sunna which enjoin freedom of religion and expression.”³³

The relation to the Other becomes central in this new approach to Islamic tradition. The work and activism of Farid Esack exemplify this new focus. Born in 1959, Esack was an important figure in the Muslim contingent of the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. He helped to break down the Islamic religious establishment’s resistance to cooperation with non-Muslims in the struggle for liberation, arguing that the struggle for social justice takes priority over religious differences—and is, furthermore, in itself eminently Islamic, even if it means cooperating with non-Muslims. His work is not only political, but also theological. To live the Qu’ran with integrity, he holds, means having to question the division between Muslim and *kafir*. Esack urges Muslims to take personal responsibility in their readings and interpretations of the Qu’ran: “Affirming the dynamic nature of the terms Islam, *iman*, and *kafir* comes back to affirming the fundamental spirit of the Qu’ran for justice.”³⁴ His attitude to the religious Other took on an even more universal dimension after 2000, when he came to live in the United States. Today he is professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Cincinnati.

Finally, we should note the work of Sherman Jackson, mentioned above, at the University of Michigan. Jackson’s work revisits the texts of twelfth century philosopher Abu Hamid Al Ghazali, in regards to tolerance of the apostate.³⁵

All these approaches to Islamic tradition which have emerged in Europe and the United States demonstrate a critical evaluation of religious texts not seen since at least the colonial period. They signal a definite concern to escape from the defensive and apologist attitude in which many figures of Muslim political and intellectual life find themselves trapped, largely due to the international political conditions discussed above. As a result, the manifestations of Muslim reform in the United States are more conspicuous than those in Europe. This is due in part to the high concentration of Muslim elites in the United States, particularly in the university system: a situation which has no parallel as yet in European countries. The other difference between American and European figures of Islamic reform has to do with the emergence, in the United States, of women’s voices, which in Europe remain weak. What is particular to the American situation is that these women—Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Kecia Ali—are at once believing, practicing (in varying degrees) Muslims who are nonetheless casting a critical eye on their own tradition. This combination is almost unthinkable on the other

side of the Atlantic, where critics of Islam are most often Muslim women and men who reject identification as Muslims, even to the point of declaring themselves Islamophobic.

Lastly, this reformist trend forms an integral part of religious and intellectual dialogue within the Muslim world. Its influence is felt in two ways: in the many intellectuals of the Muslim world (such as Abdolkarim Souroush and Abdullahi An-na'im) who have sought refuge in the United States and from there developed their thought; or on the other hand, in those born or educated in the United States (such as Amina Wadud and Omid Safi, mentioned above) who acquire a transnational notoriety through the reaction to their work in both the United States and the Muslim world. The reformation of Islamic thought is thus a product at once of western freedoms of thought and of cultural globalization.