

The Importance of Progressive Arab Reformers¹

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EVEN THOUGH it is hardly news to Arab and Muslim scholars, it is impossible to fully address the challenge of Islamism without a thorough understanding of its ideological starting points, or without a sound grasp of the current dynamics taking place within its own mental universe. The point was emphasized by the Algerian intellectual Mohamed Arkoun:

We know how political scientists portray fundamentalist movements ... either legitimising their political action against totalitarian, oppressive regimes, or condemning them as violent, fanatical, irrational and opposed to Western rational, democratic values. The theological and spiritual background of religiously inspired movements is rarely mentioned.²

Missing, to date, has been what should have been a logical starting point: a determination to take the ideological grounding of Islamists seriously, and methodically deconstruct it, instead of relying on a presumed future effectiveness of a security-focused solution to the growing crisis. “It is no use combating these by means of the security forces or even the military”, argues the Syrian-French intellectual Hashem Saleh,

we have to confront them intellectually on the grounds of the Islamic tradition itself. We have to present a new reading in place of the old one, or a new interpretation of Islam in place of the traditional, obscurantist interpretation that is outdated but which nevertheless is still deep-rooted today. For it is this that confers sanctified legitimacy to the voices of extremists and their terrorist bombings which are scything down civilians in a random manner.³

More specifically, without such an understanding it is impossible to measure to what degree the Islamists are actually departing from the ‘orthodox mainstream’, or how far they have succeeded in presenting their case as lying within the tradition.

An unheeded resource

Western analysts could be forgiven for pleading ignorance. But not for ignoring the pleadings of those who are not so limited in their understanding, or hampered by a cultural cringe or (in the case of the United Kingdom) post-colonial guilt. Hashem Saleh has commented on what he sees as the strange marginalisation of progressive thinkers:

The Arab cultural arena is not universally occupied by the obscurantist fundamentalists as the prolific studies dedicated to this in various European languages ... would have us believe. Witness the volume of foreign books focusing on the issue of Islamic fundamentalism after the criminal attacks of September 11th. Witness also the giant media corporations and Western satellite programs that can only see fundamentalists everywhere. Yet there are other kinds of renewal in the Arab and indeed the entire Islamic world, but no one speaks of them.”⁴

¹ This paper is extracted from the chapter *The Importance of Progressive Arab Reformers* and reproduced with kind permission from Bekele, A; Sookhdeo P (eds):*Meeting the Ideological Challenge of Islamism – How to Combat Modern Radical Islam*, The Westminster Institute, VA and Isaac Publishing, 2015, pp.135-170.

² Mohamed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or To Subvert?* Saqi Books, London 2006, previously published as *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Saqi, 2002.

³ The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*, December 7-8, 2012.

⁴ H. Saleh, ‘[Mohammed Arkoun on the Golden Age and Beyond](#)’, *Almuslih*.

For there are reliable alternative voices, of high intellectual quality and authority that have embraced the task of combating the Islamist advance, often at high risk to themselves. More importantly, for the sake of an issue such as this which is sabotaged by perceptions, these alternative voices have the virtue of being *culturally bi-lingual*. This means that, unlike some of our spokesmen and commentators in the West, Muslim intellectuals are not so reticent to state the obvious: that this is a *religious* issue. It is about Islam. Perhaps not as many perceive it at the moment, but very much about Islam, about its legacy and its internal intellectual infrastructures.⁵

It would be useful, then, to highlight the role of progressive Arab Muslim intellectuals as they impact upon the West, and demonstrate how they can help us understand the problem, and why their opinions are useful to us in breaking down the wall of reticence that prevents us from fully engaging in the debate.

Perhaps the best demonstration of the clarity this can bring is the definition of the issue of Islamist violence given by the Tunisian intellectual, the late Lafif Lakhdar, as being the work of the *'Islamic Far Right'*. That one term solves at a stroke our confusion as to what it is that we are up against. That is, it is not something separate from Islam, some form of contemporary deviant perversion, but more precisely a tendency (and a culturally authentic one at that) which once had fair claim to being the 'mainstream', as indeed Islamists claim for it.

How is this possible? To explain this apparent conundrum we should consider the pivotal role played (for good or for ill) by Muslim intellectuals historically. In brief, what aided the virtual triumph of the Islamist claim to representing Islamic authenticity, is their skilful manipulation of the space left by the abdication of Arab and Muslim intellectuals from the task of indigenizing modernity. Arab thinkers of the 19th and the early 20th century *Nahda* ('Resurgence') failed to revisit issues of authority, the state and the individual, issues which had been left unfinished with the medieval closing off of independent jurisprudential reasoning (*ijtihad*). Of particular importance was their neglecting to resolve the debate on "non-divine rule" (*hukm al-tāghūt*). As Hassan Mneimneh explains:

The advocates of liberalism, nationalism and leftism in subsequent eras saw no need to focus on this issue ... They all relegated religiously derived thought to the status of an atavistic reflex that would soon be swept away by the organic reality of either progress or nation or class. And Islamism in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, benefited from this omission.⁶

Fascinated by western achievements in these areas, the Arab educated élite simply imported a foreign conceptual language without indigenizing the underlying issues with reference to the Islamic corpus of inherited law and literature. Abandoned by the leading lights, this Islamic intellectual enterprise languished and simplified, and it was left to lesser minds, such as that of Hasan al-Bannā' the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, to seek the indigenization.

It was, therefore, first and foremost an intellectual struggle, before it became a political, and subsequently a security struggle. This was highlighted by the *Almuslih* Rome Conference in December 2012⁷, where discussions held between a selection of intellectuals, Arab and western, concluded that intellectual restructuring would have to precede meaningful reform on the ground. This restructuring, according to Hashem Saleh, one of the participants,

is where the basic task of the conference and those attending it lies. For a true, future, political Spring must first be preceded by an intellectual enlightenment! We cannot forge an Arab future with the mentality of bygone eras. This is where the great contradiction inherent in the current 'Spring' resides. But given that this mentality is still predominant and enjoys a historical legitimacy and a massive

⁵ The reluctance to address the religious motivation for acts of terrorism is an interesting feature of contemporary analysis of jihadism. The default perception of the grievance factors driving terrorist groups is limited to left-wing, right-wing or ethnonationalist/separatist programmes. One of the few studies to address this issue is that by David C Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, No3 (September 1984), in which the author observes that before the nineteenth century, religion was the only acceptable cause for terrorism, providing a transcendent purpose that rose above the treacherous and petty political concerns of man.

⁶ Hassan Mneimneh, 'The Islamization of Arab Culture,' in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 6.

⁷ The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*.

public support, we will have to cross swords with it in one form or another. In other words, we have to criticise it and pull it apart.

He later went on to explain that

the question is therefore a cultural one, and the battle is, in the first degree, intellectual. If we do not win the intellectual battle for enlightenment against the fundamentalists, we will not at any day win the political battle. And for this very reason the Arab Spring will only turn into a fundamentalist Autumn.

But this also presupposes the need for a new concept of security response, one that recognizes that *the war of ideas is the primary arena of conflict*. Wise heads in the Middle East have already been flagging up for some time the need to think outside the ‘security solution’ box and, as the Saudi liberal commentator Mshari al-Dhaydi put it, concentrate on:

the intellectual dilemma which constitutes the culture of al-Qaeda and those like it ... security should form the ‘external’ part of the solution, whereas internally, there is a need for intellectual and political reform, as well as a restructuring of Arab society. Unless there is a parallel between the external and internal parts of the solution, we will continue to go round this vicious circle until we wear ourselves out.⁸

The Egyptian analyst Gamal ‘Abd al-Rahim Salih goes further, and sees that any amount of solutions on the security, political or economic front will also fail to resolve the main problem since

the root cause of terrorism lies in the intellectual framework which created a state of Muslim mind and sentiment that is not responsible for terrorism alone, but also for creating and sustaining tyranny and economic/social backwardness ... We believe that what we can call ‘the evil triangle’ of Backwardness–Tyranny–Violence is a natural product of some negative elements that are deeply rooted in the intellectual and cultural component of Arab and Muslim societies.

For which reason, he argues,

instead of eradicating terrorism through initiating democracy, or the use of counter violence, or by dealing with temporary tactical compromises, it is more practical to link it to achieving a program of intellectual enlightenment.⁹

It is the fact that such thinking lies outside the confines of established western political studies that such thoughts remain in the wilderness. At the same time this courageous focus on the negative influence of deeply-rooted, indigenous ingredients to the cultural dilemma steps equally beyond what Islamists can tolerate and hits raw nerves.

How is it that Arab Muslim intellectuals present such a perilous challenge? It is because, unlike any other voices that are cowed by political correctness, they alone are confident enough to point to the unpalatable fact that educational syllabuses in the Middle East – dominated with a few exceptions by Salafists – bear much of the responsibility for pre-priming young Arab minds towards xenophobic rejection of the other and ultimately to violence. “Enclosed, atavistic, fundamentalist thought”, laments Hashem Saleh,

predominates in our schools and universities, and not merely in our traditional institutions and colleges of Shari‘a. This thought predominates over the entire Arab Street from the Atlantic to the Arabian Gulf, and indeed the Islamic Street as a whole, from the Far West to Pakistan.

The problem with this atavism remaining unchallenged is that it provides the underpinning for

the resurgence of movements of self-isolation that pronounce excommunication upon any opening up to the modern, enlightened philosophy on the grounds that it is Western – that is, a ‘Satanic abomination’!¹⁰

⁸ Mshari al-Dhaydi, ‘Is terrorism over?’ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 1 2010.

⁹ Gamāl ‘Abd al-Rahīm Sālīh, *Riddle of the Arab and Muslim Societies, The Evil Triangle: Backwardness – Tyranny – Violence, Cultural Framework as the Driving Force*.

It is therefore unsurprising that Salafists decry the role of progressive intellectuals with bitterness. Indeed, for *Almuslih* author ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari, this antipathy is one of the defining characteristics of Salafism, in that they are

advocating the suppression of creativity, promoting conflict with liberal thinkers and rushing to pronounce scholars, intellectuals, artists and poets as ‘infidel’. They make use of mosque pulpits and websites to issue *fatwas* of incitement against ‘liberals and innovators’. The University of al-Imam in Riyadh actually awarded a first class doctorate to a Saudi researcher for his thesis: *Credal deviancy in the modern culture* in which he proscribed 200 Arab intellectuals, describing them as ‘infidel’.¹¹

The point being that the accusation of being an ‘infidel’ is an overt call for their execution. The thesis was not something produced in isolation, since an earlier work by the Saudi cleric ‘Awadh al-Qarni made explicit the Salafist position on the entire infrastructure of modernity. His 1998 publication *Modernity in the Balance of Islam* subjected Arab authors, poets, researchers, philosophers, academics, literary critics, and journalists to the accusation of heresy – thus again making licit their killing.¹²

This Salafist-directed educational war against modernity was perhaps most succinctly described by Lafif Lakhdar. Giving as the defining feature of the Salafists their reverence for the ancestors, their thoughts and deeds, he elaborated on the important corollary of this reverence – antipathy to modernity – particularly since this modernity is associated with Jews and Christians whose ways are to be rejected whatever the cost:

Ancestor-worship is ... manifested in the modernity-phobia which dominates the Arab mentality, modernism being regarded as heresy or imitation of Jews and Christians. This mentality resorts to ... subconscious tricks to evade modernity. The first is religious self-sufficient narcissism which considers itself in no need of any kind of self-renovation, on the pretext that “The first left nothing to the last” ... The second trick was adopted by most—if not all—Islamic reformers of the 19th century and is still to the present day advocated. It argues that we should renovate our thought so as to evade French modernity.

The implications of this trick, Lakhdar underlines, is the abdication of the task of fully renovating *fiqh* to cope with the modern environment to one of bypassing modernity as merely constituting ‘westernisation’. The result is that

these reformists succeeded in eluding modernity, but did not renovate *fiqh* due to a very obvious reason: the core of renovating *fiqh* lies in the adoption of modern legislation, values, sciences, and institutions whose logic and ends are different from those of the *fiqh* of the Middle Ages.

Instead, the ‘ancestor-worship’ has successfully sidelined the humanities – effectively cancelling out studies on the sociology and comparative history of religion – and it stripped the natural sciences of their original role as concepts explaining phenomena in favour of steering them towards religious perceptions of reality. Under this environment, genetic research in some Arab countries is banned for representing ‘an interference by creatures in the affairs of the Creator’ and evolutionary theory is written off as an act of apostasy.

The solution for Lakhdar is clear enough, albeit one that eludes many western observers unfamiliar with the internal infrastructures of Salafist thought:

¹⁰ H. Saleh, speaking at The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*.

¹¹ Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari, ‘[The 15 characteristics of Salafi discourse](#)’, *Almuslih*. The work in question is: Sa‘ūd bin Nasir al-Ghāmdī, *الانحراف العقدي في أدب الحداثة وفكرها* (*Credal Deviancy in the Culture of Modernism and its Thought*), a doctrinal thesis presented to the University of Imām Muhammad bin Sa‘ūd in 2003. For more on this see Shākir al-Nābulṣī *ما هو ولماذا؟*, Beirut 2009, pp.124 *follow*.

¹² ‘Awadh al-Qarnī *الحداثة في ميزان الإسلام*. On the publication of this work in 1998, the modernist literary critic Sa‘ūd al-Sarīhī lamented: “When the Kingdom’s Mufti speaks of the modernists as ‘a gang conspiring against the Nation’ I think that we are about to face a Holocaust, in that our isolation has become severe, and there is to be a form of cleansing of modernists”. (Interview on the programme *Idā‘āt* on the *al-Arabiya* satellite channel, April 8 2007).

The exit from the stormy crisis of modernity faced by the Arab World is through a conscious break with “the commitment to be different from Jews and Christians”, especially in the media, education and religious discourse. This implies reconciliation with their modernism—which has become international—without complexes or guilt feelings.¹³

For Hashem Saleh, a core task of the reconciliation process is to resolve the dilemma of ‘epistemological compartmentalisation’ that persists in much of the Arab Muslim intellectual class, with their pretensions to cultural self-sufficiency and their assumptions of superiority over other systems of belief and thought:

If they think that the Arabs (and Muslims as a whole) can overcome their present ordeal without a radical revision of their absolute theological certainties and their shrieking, self-isolating ideological slogans, then they are ... deluded.

The revision of these certainties must cross both ideological and cultural boundaries, and the Arab intellectual class would do well to understand the urgency of the task:

Either we succeed in crystallising a new interpretation of our faith and our culture – by which I mean a rationalist, enlightened, tolerant interpretation – or we will leave the field open to obscurantist puritans to wander up and down it at their leisure.¹⁴

The target for the modernist reformers is therefore primarily Salafist interpretations of Islam and the Islamic heritage, and it is worth considering here the focal points of the progressives’ attempts to dismantle this trend.

Dismissing the idea of a single interpretation

Salafists base their interpretation on an assumption which, though popularly held, is untenable: that the interpretations by classical Muslim scholars are as immutable as the Scripture,¹⁵ and that the implementation of Islamic laws has been consistent throughout history.

It is a deep rooted position, and it takes a religious scholar of the authority of former Marseilles Mufti Soheib Bencheikh to say that what we are dealing with in this formation of law is little more than the afterlife of bedouin tribalism,:

This static theology we inherited was conceived for an Islam that was the religion of the majority and had sovereignty over its lands. Moreover, it was conceived for tribal societies. This theology was meant for times when nations hardly came into contact [with each other] - and if they did, it was in a spirit of rivalry for dominance. This theology could not care less about living in harmony with other cultures, and knows nothing of pluralism based on universal principals like secularism and religious freedom - [principles that are] applicable to all religions and granted to all.¹⁶

¹³ Laff Lakhdar, ‘Moving From Salafī to Rationalist Education’, *Middle East Transparent*, June 2004. His essay contains a detailed prescription for a reformed system, to include the following units: Sira (biography of Mohammed) and Sunna (the Prophet’ words and deeds); History of Fiqh; History of Religions; Old and Modern Doctrines of Commentary; Fiqh and its Fundamentals; Language; Islamic Sects; Sufism; Modern Islamic Thought; Sciences and Arts of the Arab-Islamic Civilisation; Introduction to Linguistics; Introduction to the Study of Law; Fiqh and its Fundamentals; Scholastic Theology Research and Philosophical Questions; Comparative Fiqh; Comparative Religions; Comparative Religious Research; Contemporary Commentary on Islam and Islamic thought; History of the Philosophy of the Middle Ages; Sociology of Religion; Methodology; History of Ancient Philosophy.

¹⁴ The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*, December 7-8, 2012.

¹⁵ In most traditional definitions, *Shari’a* is referred to as law based upon the Qur’ān, the *Sunna* (sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad), and laws enacted through the consensus (*ijmā’*) of classical Muslim scholars and analogical reasoning (*qiyās*). The problem here is that this definition lumps together scholarly interpretations (*ijmā’* and *qiyās*) with what Muslims believe are revealed Scripture (Qur’ān and Sunna). This is what has led to the false association of the common immutability of all of them. Contrary to the assertion of fundamentalists about the uniformity and divinity of the laws, the implementation of Islamic laws has always differed. This is because these laws were never codified in the way modern secular laws have been. What progressive scholars now face is the weight of centuries of intellectual inertia, since the doors of *ijtihād* were closed during the Abbasid period (750–1258 AD) for political reasons. Since that time Muslim legal endeavour has amounted to little more than commentaries upon commentaries and marginalia.

¹⁶ Excerpts from *Marianne et le Prophète, l’Islam dans la France Laïque*, Paris: Grasset, 2006.

The progressive scholars' counter-action, therefore, was to embrace the task of combating popular ignorance in the Islamic world as to what an Islamic society should be, and of reconsidering the definition of legitimacy.

We can see this, for instance in the work of Dr. Olfa Youssef. By revisiting the popular conceptions of Sharī'a, and the Salafists' case which rests typically on the dictum 'the Qur'ān is valid for all times and places,' she challenges Islamist interpretations of the Qur'ānic text and the tendentious use they put it to. If the above dictum itself were true (and it has no pedigree in the writings of the ancients), there is still no case for assuming that it argues that 'actual human history must constantly reshape itself to conform to the meaning of the Qur'ānic text', as the Salafists claim. Quite simply, the Qur'ān could be equally viewed

as bearing a variety of meanings that are valid for all times and places ... meanings which comprehend all the capacities of actual human development down the ages.¹⁷

Such an interpretation allows for turning the traditional understanding on its head, and licensing instead the adaptation of the Qur'ān to modernity. The implications for the claimed 'authority' of what must now be held to be a man-made Sharī'a, are clear.

Establishing the empirical evidence

The application of the scientific method also gets results. For instance, Dr Muhammad Sanduk, a regular contributor to the reformist *Almuslih* website, uses his training to provide empirical evidence on the results of a historically flawed epistemology, which since the 11th century AD has dictated a steady decline in scientific and cultural output.¹⁸ He notes that Arab thought still looks upon the decline as some form of natural phenomenon "whenever it is not actually casting the blame on historical events and on other peoples." While remarking on this "strange case in the history of human society", he notes the equal strangeness of

contemporary Arab thought, which often supports projects for resurgence and modernisation, [but] is failing to make an attempt at studying this historical discontinuity and its causes.¹⁹

Untrammelled by western insecurities in the debate, this Iraqi scientist dismisses the blame game exploited by Arab funding institutions, which he holds are themselves responsible for the very collapse that is laid at the door of Western hostility. Instead, Sanduk sees the problem as an entirely internal one, arguing that the sanctification of 'conservation' in Muslim societies proved too powerful an instinct to be affected by any programmes undertaken by the late 19th century *Nahda*:

These attempts are no more than cultural tinkering, made in an ill-considered bid for resurgence. They embarked on the procurement of social, political and military systems that had been established by developed societies. The building up process was therefore a superficial and temporary one and these programmes began to collapse. Not only this, the construction and demolition operation went on, and still does, with the result that these societies, after having exited the prison of time, are still confusedly searching for their way.²⁰

For all the efforts at combating *alphabetic* illiteracy, he argues, there was no attempt to eradicate the *cultural* illiteracy that was leaving Arab societies ill-equipped for living in the modern age. As a result, in a sharp contrast to other developing societies and cultures, the epistemological deficit in the Muslim world is *actively strengthening* as a class of Muslim intellectuals embark on the Quixotic enterprise of 'Islamising' science. This, for Sanduk, is no more than a re-run of the mediaeval formula

¹⁷ Olfa Youssef, [Text and Context in Qur'ānic interpretation](#), *Almuslih*. She sites as an example the Caliph 'Umar's subsequent cancellation of the Qur'ānic directive to cut off the hands of thieves, arguing the *force majeure* of poverty. Youssef is celebrated for her provocative work *Le Coran au risque de la psychanalyse*, and in her work concludes that Islamic identity has always been subject to change, and that therefore the case for an Islamist policy itself collapses.

¹⁸ Sanduk provides a helpful graph to demonstrate the statistical decline in the *Almuslih* article: [Freedom and the Progress of Civilisation](#).

¹⁹ See his *Almuslih* article: [Intellectual self-isolation and the prospects of constructing a culture](#).

²⁰ M. Sanduk, [Reform: a discourse of intellectuals or a rehabilitation?](#) *Almuslih*.

that, in contradistinction to the mindset that accounted for the rise of the university system in Europe, determined the fate of the *Mustansiriyya* academy in Baghdad. That is,

the conception of knowledge as crystallised by Islamic thought, one which confirmed that no knowledge existed outside the realm of religious thought.

As such, this epistemological formula plays to a form of deep Islamic ‘exceptionalism,’

as if the Muslims were a race of mankind with a different mental make-up, one which needs a different reasoning method.²¹

Refusing the exceptionalism, and instead discerning an underlying Clash of Chronologies, progressive Arab intellectuals are left to draw out the implications in

the depths of the tragedy being lived by these Arab-Muslim societies that had been closed off from the world for centuries and were still prisoners to time.²²

The chronological alienation of Arab Muslim societies presages fatal consequences, according to Sanduk, in that this mental prison risks establishing itself in a state of ‘post-backwardness’, one where the basic cause of backwardness remains deep-rooted, and where so many red lines continue to constrict the space for intellectual freedom and doom any ‘dithering attempts at awakening’ to an unchanging trajectory of failure.²³

The value of such an unembarrassed empirical approach lies in its unassailable neutrality. By evaluating the performance of the culture on its own terms, and pinpointing some specific directions taken by Muslim thinkers (not necessarily to be considered more authentic than any other) all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim, avoid the risk of entering into ‘Clash of Cultures’ territory. Facts are facts, failures are failures. It is all – neutrally – measurable.

Introducing to the Muslim world the study of comparative religion

By repositioning the debate into the ‘Clash of Chronologies’ territory, Arab progressives are able to open up a whole new wide vista of challenge in the study of comparative fundamentalism and comparative religion.

A champion of this approach was Lafif Lakhdar, who wrote for the *Almuslih* conference a detailed analysis of how ‘Islamic’ studies of Islam have become “like a drug that has gone beyond its sell-by date” and how this approach is both vital to Islamic reform as it is deadly to Islamist pretensions, on the grounds that

- it will place Islam on an equal footing with all other faiths;
- it will teach Islam, its holy texts, its legacy and historical personalities through the prism of comparative religion which will place the relationship of the Muslim to his faith and his culture on a transparent basis, one that is freed of divine legends, riddles or mysteries.

There are clearly some intriguing possibilities thrown up by this exercise of tracing the influence upon the development of Islamic thought not only of doctrines of Judaism and Christianity, which may be familiar to many, but also of the influence of pre-Islamic Arabia in the Islamic afterlife of the pagan rituals of the *hajj*, and even of Zoroastrian doctrines.²⁴ Through such a comparative study, Lakhdar asserts,

²¹ M. Sanduk, *The Islamization of science and its intellectual problem*, *Almuslih*.

²² M. Sanduk, *Arab society and the metaphysical phase*, *Almuslih*.

²³ M. Sanduk, *Intellectual self-isolation and the prospects of constructing a culture* *Almuslih*.

²⁴ Zoroastrian eschatological elements provide some particularly thought-provoking parallels, such as the *āmār ī ruwān* – the reckoning of the souls of the sinner at the *čīnwad puhl* bridge – which provides the model for the Islamic image of the ordeal of crossing the narrow bridge (*al-sirāt*); the threefold division of the souls of the dead apportioned according to the deeds and righteousness of the believer and referenced in the Qur’ānic term *barzakh*, an extinct Iranian word (from **burz-axw* “high existence”) denoting the idea of a middle abode (termed *al-a’raf* in the Qur’ān) for the souls of those who deserve neither heaven nor hell; the descriptions of earthly pleasures in paradise;

Islam is presented, like any other religion, as but one of the cultural entities that have borrowed its rituals from cultures that preceded them, such as Judaism, Christianity and Manichaeism – from which Islam took many of its doctrines such as ‘the Seal of the Prophets’ and no less than four of its five pillars of faith: the *shahāda* (Declaration of Faith), Prayer, *Zakāh* (Alms), and Fasting’. This puts it in a position to ask questions and express doubts, and thereby take itself out of the shell of its ancient certainties.²⁵

By extricating Islam and its heritage like this from the grip of mytho-history, to history governed by human imperatives and capacities, the establishment of an ‘Islam of history’ will

help us put a stop to the religious narcissism deriving from primitive ethno-centrism, whereby “there is no salvation outside of Islam, the true faith; Islam is the solution to the problems of the Muslims and of the entire world, other religions do not exist; Judaism, Christianity were religious laws that have been abrogated by Islamic *Sharī‘a*” – and all the rest of this narcissistic delirium.²⁶

Ultimately, it will have a direct bearing upon the Islamic Far Right’s open warfare against modernity which has proved to be more than a metaphorical hostility:

- It will generate an Islamic religious rationalism, updated so as to conform to the institutions, sciences, and values of the world it is living in and against which it is still waging an open warfare;
- It will produce a Muslim individual that thinks for himself and chooses his values himself, and his own method of religious belief, so that he frees himself from the ‘directors of conscience’, and thereby prevent his being dissolved into the ‘Nation’ – all of which generates the ideology of globalised Islamic terrorism;
- It will cleanse Islam of violence – the violence of the *Sharī‘a* with its shocking corporal punishments (over the last 30 years Iran has stoned to death approximately 2000 women), the violence of personal status laws which have deprived women of their fundamental rights for 14 centuries, and the ‘legalised violence’ that manifests itself in *jihad*.

The potential of the comparative approach to force through thoroughgoing transformation was eloquently summed up by Mohamed Arkoun:

It is necessary to open up the Qur’ānic fact by situating it in a comparative approach ... If the present resources of historical enquiry allowed it to be established ... that the Qur’ān, when viewed in the ... ethno-linguistic, sociological and political theatre of ‘tribal’ life ... at the beginning of the seventh century has to change its cognitive status – a whole new field of work will be possible.²⁷

Promoting a deep re-evaluation of the tradition

The challenge to the cognitive status opened up by the comparative approach is indeed a vital weapon in the progressives’ arsenal, since Islamists attempt to found their immunity upon two broad categories. The first is *religious/cultural authenticity*, and the second is the *integrity of the Text*.

On the question of religious/cultural authenticity, the Islamists’ skilful manipulation of this argument certainly affords them strong ideological resilience. But it is a resilience founded upon weak historical foundations. “We Arabs are asleep to history” explains Hashem Saleh,

the miraculous journey into heaven by the Zoroastrian priest Arda Viraf under the guidance of an archangel Bahman, to reach in the seventh heaven the presence of Ormazd, the great deity of the whole universe, who commands him to return to earth as his ‘messenger’ to provide humanity with guidance, including the instruction to pray five times a day. All of which, of course, are closely paralleled in the Qur’ānic tale of the *mi‘rāj*.

²⁵ Lafif Lakhdar, [‘Separating the Islam of Faith from the Islam of history’](#), *Almuslih*.

²⁶ Lafif Lakhdar, [‘Separating the Islam of Faith from the Islam of history’](#), *Almuslih*.

²⁷ Arkoun, *Op. Cit.*, p.80.

Traditional certainties are the legacy of the decadence of the Middle Ages and they have smothered Islamic history to make it appear something above history or superior to it, or even without any relation to history altogether.

The Tunisian reformist intellectual Abdelmadjid Charfi deplors this prevailing interpretative approach, noting that for contemporary Islamist movements

it is unthinkable to resign oneself to accepting the distance that has opened up between the Qur'ān and everyday reality; reality [they believe] must be changed and the golden age of the early Muslim community restored. The text is not to be subjected to the test of quotidian reality. This position is based on a sort of unhistorical wishful thinking ... It has attracted many young people and the oppressed and anxious in society, victims of failed modernisation. However, its theoretical base is weak, and its adherents include many uneducated propagandists.²⁸

As the detachment from reality progressively widens, the 'narcissistic delirium' demands the employment of ever more strident fantasies, to the point where the disconnect becomes accepted. This detachment, according to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, actually rests upon a tacit compartmentalisation inherent in the Islamic tradition:

There exists right from the beginning of Islamic history – including the era of the Revelation of the elaboration of the texts – a permanent conviction that the religious texts have their own domains for intervention, and then there are other domains which are open to the intervention of reason and the human experience, domains which do not apply to the religious texts.²⁹

Mohamed Arkoun termed this domain the 'official closed corpus' and identified it as the critical arena of the struggle for reform and intellectual emancipation.

In his works 'Critique of Islamic Thought' and 'Islam, to Reform or to Subvert,' he understands that the forces opposing intellectual revival in the Muslim world are much tougher than many would like to imagine. He laments the difficulty of opening up this closed corpus, and the 'dogmatic enclosure' that it perpetuates. The enclosure is both extensive and deeply entrenched:

The concept of *dogmatic enclosure* applies to the totality of the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes which allow a system of beliefs and unbeliefs to operate freely without any competing action from inside or out. A strategy of refusal, consisting of an arsenal of discursive constraints and procedures, permits the protection and, if necessary, the mobilisation of what is uncritically called 'faith.'³⁰

This corpus the interpreting community has accepted and will continue to accept for the foreseeable future as a *tanzil*, a revealed given that abolishes through interpretation and in experience, i.e., in the course of history, the status of the corpus as analysed by historians.³¹

Facing this challenge, progressive thinkers are proposing new forms of interpretation, forms which *prioritize the requirements and achievements of modernity* over traditional Muslim scholarship. Such a process, according to the Moroccan progressive thinker Abdou Filali-Ansari,

is not preoccupied with following the righteous ancestors; nor does it consider its mission is one of purifying religion and belief from innovation and plagues that have affected its unblemished spirit ...The reformers' project of revision is carried out in an intellectually rigorous way, pertinent to the time in which we live.³²

²⁸ Abdelmadjid Charfi, *Islam, Between Message and History*, Ed. Abdou Filali-Ansary and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed Tr. David Bond, Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

²⁹ Nasr Abou Zeid, *Critique du discours religieux*, (نقد الخطاب الديني), tr. M. Chairet, Sindbad, Paris 1999.

³⁰ Arkoun, *Op. Cit.*, p.87.

³¹ Arkoun, *Op. Cit.*, p.82.

³² A. Filali-Ansari, *Réformer l'Islam*, (Paris 2003), pp.238-241.

The salient feature of this time, according to the reformists, is the transferral of emphasis from a collective to an individual identity, which will have a major impact on interpreting the religious heritage. For the Tunisian historian Mohamed Talbi,

personal integrity, adoption of freedom as the basis of religion and the following of the moral and human aims of the Qur'ān are all worthier and more important for the Muslim than following the ancestors and legislating according to their legal schools ... *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) is to be set aside in favour of a new historical and spiritual approach in the light of the original aims of the Qur'ān.³³

The perspective provided by the comparative study of religion, the access to the European experience of analysis of its own religious traditions, offers Muslim reformers the prospect of enacting this new approach by applying the same methodologies to the Islamic heritage. The historical-critical method, wherever it has been applied, has promoted an emancipation from traditional authority and fostered renewal through the creativity offered by modernity's open-endedness:

This is the opposite to the traditional theological understanding of belief in Islam, as stated in the hadith attributed to the Prophet: "The believer is like a camel: when he is curbed, he is led."³⁴

The most important results of this method are particularly evident in the courageous initiatives of progressive reformers in *historicizing the Qur'ān*. Reformers such as Abdelmadjid Charfi are aware that a religion cannot be constructively reduced to its simple historical manifestation, yet they insist that there is nothing to outlaw the study of the Qur'ān from an historical perspective, given that

neither present-day Muslims nor the generations who came after the Followers possess a direct knowledge of the specificities of this discourse, the precise circumstances surrounding it, the individual or individuals concerned ... It was, in fact, subsequent generations who made an effort to examine the circumstances, and they were set down, albeit only partially, at a later period.³⁵

As a consequence of this modernist starting point, progressive scholars dismiss the Islamists' claim that the text of the Scripture is to remain immune from re-evaluation:

Every text, including the Qur'ān, has to be subjected to new interpretations and considered afresh ... The crucial point in a religious text is an understanding of its aim and its spirit, not the particular means through which the spirit was communicated in periods of history when prevailing mentality required such means.³⁶

By adopting such a position, these scholars seek to safeguard the universal human principles they discern in the Text and bring about the contemporary means of realising them. The task is an onerous one, however, since the downward pull of intellectual mediocrity and the weight of time has prioritised the letter of the Qur'ānic text over the content of its message. Dull minds, Prof. Charfi explains,

took what could be empirically observed as the benchmark by which the unknown and mysterious workings of Providence could be studied, and thus imposed necessarily limited human categories and interpretations on the domain of the divine.³⁷

³³ Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, in his Introduction to Charfi, *Islam, Between Message and History*, p.5.

³⁴ Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, Introduction to Charfi, *Islam, Between Message and History*, p.7.

³⁵ Charfi, *Islam*, p.50. The author argues that although Qur'anic sciences include what is known as *asbab al-nuzul* ("circumstances of revelation"), nevertheless these date no earlier than three generations after the death of Muhammad, so that their texts are in parts marked by confusion and invention.

³⁶ Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, Introduction to Charfi, *Islam, Between Message and History*, p.6.

³⁷ Charfi, *Islam*, p.54. The author notes that "The specialists in *tafsir* went to great lengths in order to explain all the details of the most sweeping and general declarations, and to specify what was meant by every allusion. Symbols became tangible historical facts. It is not the commands and prohibitions relating to prevailing circumstances at the time of Muhammad's preaching which should be studied, but the implicit aims and intentions."

Understandably, this type of research is hitting a raw nerve among Islamists, whose reaction has at times taken a violent turn.³⁸ This accounts for the level of caution in what, in these early stages, remains a ‘perilous surgical operation’.³⁹

One notices generally that most, if not all, Arab intellectuals tremble in fear and remain on the back foot when it comes to the most important issue occupying the world at present: the issue of a serious critical study of the Islamic religious heritage. To put it another way, they do not dare to enter into the arena of religious and theological thought itself, the impermeable fortress fenced off for centuries with barbed wire. Consequently they talk about everything else except the one thing that needs to be talked about. The best proof of this is the gifted Moroccan thinker Muhammad ‘Ābid al-Jabrī whose project ‘The Critique of Arab Thought’ enjoyed great success despite its glaring shortcomings. For he fails to deal with the sensitive issue, the most important issue in Arab thought, and instead stays cautiously clear of it.⁴⁰

Yet without a challenge made to this material itself, to its claimed ‘a-historicity’ and eternal, unchanging relevance down to its last Arabic letter – that is, if it is left to the Islamists to define the arena for debate as one that can only be held within the fabric of the Text, then their immunity is upheld. “We can see that the historicization process will not be effortless or easy”, argues Hashem Saleh,

since it will have to clash with strong psychological obstacles located deep within the Islamic consciousness. Nevertheless, the battle is joined...⁴¹

Boldly scrutinizing the fabric of the Text

The battle is at its fiercest over the second of the two categories, *textual authority*, since it is the one which constitutes the Islamists’ core armoury. Both Islamists and militant Jihadists justify their positions with constant reference to what they consider to be a non-negotiable primary source material – the *Qur’ān* and the *Hadīth*, along with the Prophetic *sīra* (biography) literature – in order to establish that they are replacing a tainted, modernist Islamic pattern with a more authentic one. It is here that the epicentre of the debate is located. According to Soheib Bencheikh,

Any attempt to reform Islam - and Muslim jurisprudence in particular - must disregard its sanctity and reread texts in the light of modern thinking, in quest of a [new] orientation.⁴²

This is (by anyone let alone a Muslim cleric) an extraordinary statement to make. Why is this focus on the Text so important? It is because scripturalism is of crucial significance for Islamists. Beyond the obvious fact that they paint themselves as authentic precisely because of their close adherence to the Scripture in their formulation of what true Islam is, the fabric of the Text — particularly its Arabicness — is a fundamental building block of their political ideology since it assumes the perfection of the nuts and bolts of that source, word for word, letter by letter.

The concept of the Text as something sacralized and lying outside the bounds of investigation constitutes a core foundation upon which Islamism, and indeed much of traditional Islam, bases its

³⁸ Abu Zayd certainly fell foul of these raw nerves. He was refused tenure at Cairo University due to the humanistic methodology he applied to Qur’ānic hermeneutics. His promotion of the idea of the historicity of the Qur’ānic text was considered to constitute apostasy. He was duly declared an apostate by an Egyptian court and was forced to flee Egypt, after receiving death threats. Other famous cases were the defenestration of Suliman Bashear by Islamists enraged by the thesis of his work which argued that Islam developed as a religion within the historical context of Judaism and Christianity, and of course most famously the story of Taha Hussein and his revisiting of the question on the genuineness of pre-Islamic poetry, and hence the canonical tradition concerning the Arabic idiom of the Qur’ān.

³⁹ “Indeed, the application of the historical method to sacred texts and to the persons of the Prophets shocked the traditionalist faithful to the core. You may think of this as a perilous surgical operation or a severe internal bleeding, things which inevitably occur whenever one applies the historical method to the study of the Islamic religious heritage”. H. Saleh, ‘Orientalism and the historicization of the Islamic heritage’, *Almuslih* website: http://www.almuslih.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=254:orientalism-and-the-historicization-of-the-islamic-heritage&catid=44:islam-in-history&Itemid=214 .

⁴⁰ H. Saleh: ‘Mohammed Arkoun on the Golden Age and Beyond’, *Almuslih*.

⁴¹ H. Saleh, ‘Orientalism and the historicization of the Islamic heritage’, *Almuslih*.

⁴² “Quotations by Soheib Bencheikh”: <http://soheib.bencheikh.over-blog.com/categorie-733578.html>.

arguments for a static and un-progressive elaboration of legal authority. These arguments maintain that:

- a) the *Qur'ānic text is of divine authorship*, down to its smallest Arab phoneme;⁴³
- b) it is *an uncorrupted text* – there are no alternative readings⁴⁴;
- c) the Text is *outside history*, there is no ‘development’ in it;⁴⁵
- d) *Islam began fully formed*, and was not the result of a historical process of development.

Challenging this textual immutability, on the other hand, restores the case for the Muslim progressives’ creative approach to faith and law. For textual variance would necessarily imply development and the influence of human agency in the transmission of the Revelation. This would oblige an understanding of the Qur’ān as a Revelation rooted in history, and therefore one that demands a knowledge of context. A contextual approach to interpretation would in turn severely weaken the Islamist case for an unchanging prototype. In all, the implications of calling the integrity of the Text into question may be summarized as follows:

a) *The authority of passive textual referencing in legal thought would be challenged*

The Qur’ān would emerge more properly as a text *about* God and hence subject to interpretation.⁴⁶ It would mean that the Islamist technique of plucking verses, or even half-verses out of context (on the grounds that every part of the Text is valid for all time) would no longer be available to them to defend their positions;

b) *The imperfection of the text would impact on the claim to direct divine dictation*

Traditionalist doctrine ‘particularizes’ Islam over other faiths⁴⁷ and any challenge to this would establish the role of human agency. A distinguishing feature of Salafist and Jihadi-Salafist thought is to repudiate the concept of a ‘common humanity’ (as a western modernist concept) by overriding it with a purported Islamic exceptionalism, allowing for ethical non-equivalence. The result of broadening the findings of this research would be to undermine the case for the Sharī‘a as a non-negotiable pre-requisite for Islamic identity;

c) *It would promote a self-confident progressive interpretation of Islam*

By removing the Qur’ān’s immunity to internal historical development the doors to subsequent development in the religion of Islam would be opened, overriding the pattern set by the ‘Righteous Ancestors’ (*al-salaf al-sālih*) and the early scholars of *fiqh*;

d) *It would de-legitimize fundamentalist readings*

If the Qur’ān’s existence were to be demonstrated as not deriving from a process of immutable inspiration, but was rather a product of intellectual, theological and ethical *development*, this

⁴³ For the scripturalism of the Islamists, the more textually they comprehend God’s word, the closer they are to His true will. Islamic law has enshrined this process as a foundation of the faith: العبرة بعموم اللفظ لا بخصوص السبب “the precepts are derived from the universality of the expression, not the specificity of the context.” That is, the authority of the text overrides the lessons of life’s experience.

⁴⁴ This position is mandated by the Qur’ānic verse: *Do they not then meditate on the Quran? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy* [IV,82]. Such a standpoint was unaffected by the evidence provided by the fact of the Caliph ‘Uthman’s recension of divergent Qur’āns, as a result of which variant versions were destroyed.

⁴⁵ The issue of *mansūkh* verses (cases where one Qur’ānic verse appears contradicted by another, deemed later in date and is ‘abrogated’) does not alter the unchanging perfection of the Text, since the traditionalist argumentation is not that there is a development towards something better, but that the context to which the Truth is applied is different. That context may again change, calling for the reapplication of the ‘abrogated’ verse. The Truth itself of the verse is never superseded nor go out of date. The key intellectual element behind abrogation is the *avoidance of evaluation*.

⁴⁶ An indication of this are the *de rigueur* grammatical introductions to religious/legal treatises, and the de facto prioritization of obedience to the letter of the text over the workings of the individual’s conscience.

⁴⁷ It would imply as one author put it, a process which would ‘amount to copyediting God.’ T. Lester, *What is the Koran?*

would call into question the authority of the fundamentalist veto against creative interpretation typified by Ibn Hanbal's formula:

“Whoever involves themselves in any theological rhetoric is not counted amongst the Ahl us-Sunnah, even if by that he arrives at the Sunnah, until he abandons debating and surrenders to the texts.”⁴⁸

Yet, such precisely are the challenges that are being formulated by progressive intellectuals in the Muslim world who are striving – often at considerable risk to themselves – to demonstrate how the establishment of the Text was a dynamic, selective process replete with revisions and expansions, and one which was carried out in response to the changing concerns and interests of the early Muslim communities.

The historico-critical habit yields still more results. What is it, Abdelmadjid Charfi asks, that we actually mean when we say the “Book”? For many it would simply be what is generally understood by the term:

that is to say, what is inscribed in the form of a written line on a supporting surface ... [But the Qur'ānic terms refer] rather to the content of the message that God saw fit to entrust to the prophets in order that they could communicate it to humankind ... There is no clearer proof of this and the way in which the revelation used the term “Book” when the Prophet had not received the complete Qur'ān, revealed in instalments, at intervals of varying length.

In which case, the non-negotiable primary source of the Qur'ān as chapter-and-verse reference can also be denied the Islamists:

The term Qur'ān should really be used only for the message which the Prophet conveyed orally to his contemporaries. As far as what was collected after his death in a particular order “between two covers” is concerned, it is known that the Prophet's Companions were not initially in agreement about the legitimacy of this collection which the Prophet did not carry out or personally order ... They were hesitant even about what name to give to the document before they agreed on the term *mushaf* (volume, book), a term they had encountered in Abyssinia.

The only logical conclusion, for Charfi, is that the “reminder” that God undertook to perpetuate

was the content and not the outer ... expressions and words ... set down in a particular form and attributed to a particular people. This outer linguistic form has grammar, syntax and grammatical bases which are no different from those of any other language.

From here the ultimate claim to scriptural uniqueness – the ‘inimitability of the Text’ – is similarly challenged. If the style of the Qur'ān is distinct and distinguished,

great works of art, be they poetry, prose, drawings, sculptures, or musical masterpieces, are all, in their particular way, unique. They cannot, despite the human origins, be reproduced ... imitation always represents a decline when compared with the original creative work.

The corollary of this approach to the Text is the destruction of its empirical demonstration of Truth, as fancied by the Islamists.

The divine origin of the text cannot be proved by rational means, leaving faith or unbelief as the only possible choices.⁴⁹

The crucial importance of research on the fabric of the Qur'ānic scripture is therefore self-evident. Yet the impact of textual criticism in the Muslim world was limited for as long as the research remained inaccessible in western languages or written off as the work of insufficiently trained scholars or those considered to have suspect motives.⁵⁰ But as the scholarship came to be taken up by

⁴⁸ Ibn Hanbal, أصول السنة (‘The Foundations of the Sunna’), Ch. 10 (p.169) ed. A. Zumarlee, April 1991.

⁴⁹ Abdelmadjid Charfi, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ A good example of this ‘defence’ is Dr. Maher Hathout's (Islamic Center of Southern California) response (“MPAC Response to NYT Article on Qur'anic Origins”) to the Alexander Stille's article: ‘Radical New Views of Islam and the Origins of the Koran’, *New York Times*, March 2 2002.

progressive Arab and Muslim scholars, whose linguistic facility and *fiqh* expertise are more difficult to call into question, the temperature has risen. This has meant that there is something of the flavor of subversive secrecy attached to the research – or even the perusal – of textual criticism. Dr. Bassam Tahhan gives an indication of the anomaly:

The German orientalist Theodor Noldeke wrote several volumes on the history of the various Korans. Today the Arabic translation of his book is being circulated in secret. Jews and Christians readily accept the different versions of their sacred scriptures. Why shouldn't we?⁵¹

As it stands, advanced textual scholarship of the core texts of Islamic scripture, historically documented editorial revisions of the Qur'ānic text,⁵² the existence of manuscripts demonstrating variant readings of the Qur'ān (such as the Yemeni fragments⁵³ and the Munich photographic archive⁵⁴) are calling into question the immutability of the source foundations (the *Qur'ān*, *Hadīth* and *Sīra* literature) as justification for the narrowest interpretations of Islamic belief and conduct. And the impact of this research is direct. The Tunisian scholar Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, who is leading a team working on the Yemeni fragments to establish a critical edition of the Qur'ān, argues that the differences in the texts from the canonical version are enough to

enlarge our thinking about women's condition, religious tolerance, and what we call human rights.⁵⁵

Rehabilitating Orientalism

Bassam Tahhan's observation on Jewish and Christian readiness to engage with the question of textual variants, and the natural extension by the Orientalists of the historical-critical method to Islam, flags up an important nodal point in the struggle for reform and the propriety of western engagement. "If Westerners want to help us succeed in bringing reform and enlightenment to the Arab and Islamic world" argues Hashem Saleh, "one of the methods would be to translate the works of great Orientalists into the Arabic language." He points to the body of important works on the Islamic heritage – on the *sīra* of the Prophet, the Qur'ān, the hadīth, the Shari'a and *fiqh* – published in English, French and German, but of which the Arab, Muslim reader remains blissfully unaware:

For the prevailing works that we have at the moment on these sensitive subjects are far more traditional than is necessary and are reverential rather than historical. These works feed the fiery imagination of the fundamentalists. Consequently the translation of these great Orientalists works and their wide-scale publication in the Arab world will liberate us from puritanical, alienating, ahistorical and obscurantist conceptions of the religious heritage.⁵⁶

Mohamed Arkoun noted the particular value of research endeavour in this field, and voiced his unapologetic admiration for

the pioneering Western researchers in the field of Qur'ānic studies and Islamic thought in general, to a point where I am accused by Muslim colleagues of ignoring or excluding Muslim contributors to the

⁵¹ Interview in *Telquel* (Morocco), Issue 229, June, 2006.

⁵² The medieval bibliographer Ibn al-Nadim lists several versions of the Qur'ān which were not recognized by the Caliphs. Under the Caliph 'Uthman one version became the standard, after which all other versions were ordered burnt. Some of the Companions expressed their disapproval of his editing and variant readings continued to be circulated. Several *ahādīth* refer to the then current text of the Qur'ān as 'incomplete,' or bearing spurious verses, or cite verses which are not extant in the text in circulation today.

⁵³ In 1972, during the restoration of the Great Mosque of San'ā, 7th and 8th century parchment pages bearing variant readings of the Qur'ān were discovered. These are some of the oldest Qur'ān texts in existence. Some of them are also palimpsests where the text is written over even earlier, washed-off versions. In several cases the organization of the text is different, the *suras* are sometimes in a different order, and there are differences in the text itself. They indicate an evolving text rather than give support to the orthodox belief in a single Revelation to the Prophet. Aware of the potential for controversy, Yemeni authorities are reticent about the work being carried out on these texts by German scholars and have restricted further access to them.

⁵⁴ The archive is the work of German Orientalist scholars Gotthelf Bergsträsser and Otto Pretzl, who searched out and photographed old copies of the Qur'ān in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe in the 1930s. The Berlin University *Corpus Coranicum* project, which aims to provide the ultimate *apparatus criticus* for the Qur'ān text, has incorporated these fragments into its research.

⁵⁵ J. Quilty, 'Giving the Koran a history: Holy Book under scrutiny, Scholars draw techniques of textual criticism from those used to analyze Bible', *Daily Star*, Lebanon, July 12, 2003.

⁵⁶ The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*.

field. [Yet] there is no doubt that Muslims cannot cross the boundaries of the creed based on the *myth of origins* which remains for them the greatest unthinkable.⁵⁷

Just how ‘unthinkable’ can be gauged from the conservative Muslim reaction to such research, which has found itself written off variously as ‘psychotic vandalism,’ an act of enmity or at best ‘reckless rationalism’⁵⁸. Remarkably, the climate for Orientalist investigation into the core texts has actually narrowed over the course of the last century, as Arkoun explains:

The taboo that Muslim orthodoxy has always placed on Qur’ānic studies was more easily lifted during the period of historical philological positivism than it is today. The euphoria of scientific reasoning was boosted by colonial rule. Hence the battle for a critical edition of the text of the Qur’ān, including most notably a chronological ranking of the *sūrat* is not as persistent as it was in the period between the writings of T. Nöldeke and those of R. Blachère. All the same, this subject has lost nothing of its scientific relevance, since it implies a more reliable historical reading, less dependent upon suppositions, hypotheses and the quest for the plausible.

Getting in the way of this logical trajectory of research is what can only be described as an odd meeting of minds between Islamists and a broad strand of western intellectuals who undertake to devalue the work of European Orientalists. Happily, the broad denunciation of Orientalism (in the West as much as the East), as typified in the work of Edward Said, is being challenged by contemporary Arab voices of reform. “One cannot reduce the function of knowledge simply to pure power relations”, argues Hashem Saleh, “indeed we primarily do wrong to ourselves, for Orientalism has no need of us; it is we who have need of Orientalism.”⁵⁹ The clarity and honesty of this Arab Muslim intellectual on this issue is refreshing:

We have to acknowledge this considerable backwardness the Muslims suffer from in their studies on their own heritage and their past, as compared to the studies undertaken by Orientalist scholarship ... We are but students in the great school of Orientalism ... Our position is indeed somewhat wondrous and strange; we refuse to engage in the scientific historical study of our heritage and at the same time we wish to prevent others from undertaking this task! Instead of thanking Orientalism for its sterling services, we pour the cup of our anger over it and spend all our time cursing it and insulting it.

Un-ideologized intellectuals such as Hashem Saleh and Lafif Lakhdar⁶⁰ have recognised the important contribution European Orientalism has made to the historicization of an Islamic thought that is otherwise steeped head to toe in sanctified, theological certainties and superstition:

They were able to present a historical picture – a positivist realistic one – of some highly sacralised issues that none had dared touch upon or even approach. And it is for this reason that their researches provoked angry reactions amongst conservative Muslims who held these studies to be an attack on Islam, or even an attempt to destroy it!⁶¹

For which reason, Saleh argues, any differences Arab intellectuals might have with the Orientalists should be restricted to methodology, in contrast to the politico-ideological conflict being waged at present against them:

It is high time that we shift Arab thought on from its ideological stage – a phase of shouting and slogans – to an epistemological phase of sober cognitive responsibility.

⁵⁷ Arkoun, *Op. Cit.* p.72. (Author’s own emphasis).

⁵⁸ S. Parvez Manzoor, *Method Against Truth, Orientalism and Qur’anic Studies*, 1987.

⁵⁹ H. Saleh, *Orientalism and the historicization of the Islamic heritage*, Almuslih.

⁶⁰ “The translation of works of Orientalists on Islamic heritage – works which were guided by the rationalist science of comparative religion – will play its part in preventing the brainwashing practised by religious stagnation for eight centuries, and which continues still.” See The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*.

⁶¹ A typical expression of this conspiracy theory may be seen in the following diagnosis of Orientalist motives by S. Parvez Manzoor: “In order to rid the West forever of the ‘problem’ of Islam, [Western man] reasoned, Muslim consciousness must be made to despair of the cognitive certainty of the Divine message revealed to the Prophet. Only a Muslim confounded of the historical authenticity or doctrinal autonomy of the Qur’anic revelation would abdicate his universal mission and, hence, pose no challenge to the global domination of the West. Such, at least, seems to have been the tacit, if not the explicit, rationale of the Orientalist assault on the Qur’an.” S. Parvez Manzoor, *Method Against Truth, Orientalism and Qur’anic Studies*, 1987.

The significance of this research

What is being challenged by contemporary secularising intellectuals in the Arab world is the core issue of ‘authenticity’. As we have seen, this issue is obscured by confusion on where to locate the parting of the ways. Traditionalists and Islamists alike will pinpoint the closing years of the 19th century and the ethicising reforms of the scholars of the *Nahda* as defining the point of deviation from the authentic pattern of the Islamic heritage. Progressive scholars, on the other hand, will see precisely this era as the period when the long task of re-instating the long-buried true message of Islam – smothered at the earliest period by the dictates of dynastic rule and buried again with the defeat of the rationalising schools in the tenth century AD – was initiated. All of which means that, as an explanation for the conundrum of what constitutes ‘authentic Islam,’ it is largely a matter of where one chooses to date it from.

But for the progressive Arab thinkers, the ceaseless quest for ‘authenticity’ is a fruitless distraction since the key to rejuvenating and revitalizing Islam lies in understanding and reviving creativity in thought, which must of its nature break free of culturally delimiting patterns. Mohammed Arkoun spent his professional life attempting to extract authenticity from the pre-occupations of Arab Muslim thinkers, arguing that the revitalisation of humanism in Islam was being hindered by the escapism that this pre-occupation offered from the thorny internal challenge of analyzing the texts that underpin Muslim law, and by its unhealthy exteriorization of patriarchal nationalism, fanaticism and xenophobia.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the position of the Islamists is manifestly weak. The pool of ‘authentic’ resources is by nature stagnant, and for as long as they persist in seeing history as immobile and remain blind to its dynamics and movement, they will forever lack the appropriate theoretical bases with which to confront the questions posed by contemporary life. “They are unable to provide coherent responses,” argues Abdelmadjid Charfi,

while the Utopian vision of the Islamist movements has no chance of success. It would condemn Muslim societies to being overtaken by the movement of history and its complexities, far removed from the simplicity of the early Muslim community. The values of the Enlightenment, far from being rejected, are becoming more firmly established. The points of view of ... Islamic reformers converge in that they call for part of the message of Muhammad to be retained, while the rest will be set aside or interpreted, without any guarantee that a particular interpretation is more valid than its rivals.⁶²

The foregoing pages have demonstrated the vital role played by Arab reformist intellectuals in renewing the ‘indigenization of modernity’ process. All of which makes their near invisibility in public debate in the West all the more surprising. Their obscurity is not helped by the tendency of western media to overlook them. As Hussein Haqqani underlines:

For many Americans, the Muslim Brotherhood’s version is now the “official” and mainstream version of Islam. If a news organization is looking for a spokesman for the Muslims, they usually go to one of the Brotherhood-linked organizations, marginalizing the opinions of non-radical Muslims.⁶³

Rather than encouraging the voice of liberal thinkers in the Islamic world a strange bias born of a peculiar type of cultural insecurity has developed, as Ibn Warraq caustically observes:

The West, in its unwillingness to pass judgments on other cultures is far too ready to accept as legitimate spokesmen for the entire world-wide Muslim community the most shrill and public-savvy on matters on Islamic doctrine.⁶⁴

⁶² Abdelmadjid Charfi, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Hussein Haqqani, ‘The Politicization of American Islam,’ *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 6. The motto of the Muslim Brotherhood ought to be enough to clear up any opacity: “Allah is our objective; the Prophet is our leader; the Qur’ān is our law; *jihād* is our way; and dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.” Their alumni include the Afghan jihad ideologue ‘Abd Allāh ‘Azzām and the mastermind of the September 11th attacks Khālid Shaykh Muhammad.

⁶⁴ Criticising the paralysis inflicted by the heritage of Edward Said’s attack on Orientalism, Ibn Warraq notes how western weakness causes Arab liberals to “look with dismay at us each time we sacrifice one principle after another, in an orgy of self-doubt, cultural masochism, and self-censorship.” Andrew Harrod, ‘Ibn Warraq Takes on Fact, Fiction, and Freedom’, *Frontpage Mag*, January 1 2014.

This insecurity has had the unfortunate effect of inducing major media organisations – western or eastern – to lend centre-stage to one side of the argument. Lafif Lakhdar describes the problem:

The European media - the audio-visual media in particular - which looks to be provocative at any price - presents the supporters of this [Islamist] tendency on any and every occasion. [They present] people like Tareq Ramadan, but it is rare for them to present Fathi Bin Salama, or Malek Chebel, or Taher Ben Jelloun, Ghaleb bin Sheikh, [former] Marseilles mufti Soheib Bin Sheikh, Hashem Saleh, Mohammed Arkoun, or myself, and dozens of other secularising Muslim intellectuals. ... The Arab media, like *Al-Jazeera*, *Iqra*, and *Al-Manar* [TV], which have a large audience among European Muslims, act in the same manner. The supporters of the secularist tendency are blocked out of these media.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, it would be over tendentious to lay the fault exclusively at their door. Perhaps the more significant impediment to the propagation of the progressive message is the lack of an effective co-ordination of any response to Islamist propaganda. “There is no institution that unites us”, Lafif Lakhdar goes on to lament,

Nor is there any shared programme that defines the task and the priorities ... the obstacles are many: first among which the absence of an institution tasked with overseeing the implementation of the reform programme and financing it. All we have left are individual initiatives that are necessarily disorganised. In the absence of this institution the prevailing understanding of reform is fragmentary, and does not comprehend all of its aspects.⁶⁶

If the voices of reason are at present fragmented and isolated, there is no reason why they should remain so, or be left to their own devices. As the embarrassed silences and exaggerated efforts to avoid the elephant in the room eloquently demonstrate, religious doctrine, religious law (the ‘*fiqh* of jihad’) theology – all these are core ingredients of jihadist violence in the Middle East and across the globe. Islamism invokes religion by identifying itself as a movement engaged upon a salvific mission, it portrays and *understands* its opponents in religious terms and in its militant jihadist manifestation justifies its acts of violence through the language and citation of Islamic scripture. If, to recap Mohamed Arkoun’s observation,

the theological and spiritual background of religiously inspired movements is rarely mentioned,

this is simply because its admixture of totalitarian and religious/doctrinal patterns of thought is proving highly complicating to western analysts. It is, after all, a new class of challenge, and therefore requires a new type of analytical training, one that is able to accommodate the return of the sacred to the arenas of security and international relations.⁶⁷

As such, westerners and non-Muslims have no reason to see themselves excluded, any more than Arab Muslim intellectuals, from the internal debate on Islam at every level that this debate is taking place. The Muslim cleric Soheib Bencheikh put the case succinctly:

Islam is a message for all humanity. Therefore, it is not the property of Muslims [alone]. Everyone has the right to be fascinated by this religion, to adhere to it, to be critical of it, and even to be hostile to it... To avoid criticizing Islam is a form of segregation.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Interview with M. Milson, published on *Elaph*, September 8, 2007.

⁶⁶ Lafif Lakhdar, Contributing paper to The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*. One commentator on his paper put it thus: “[Those who support the project of reform] need to stand together and co-operate with each other more ... It is exasperating to see antediluvian thinkers co-operating and standing together while, not long ago, two great scholars of enlightenment thought – Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohamed Arkoun have now passed away. The geographic distance between them – Holland and Paris – was not great, but did they ever meet? I imagine that that never happened. I give this example to show the psychological gaps separating the bearers of this project. In my view it is high time for some co-operative work and effort, not to say collective work and effort.” Yahya Belhasan, commenting on the *Al-Awan* website, December 16, 2012.

⁶⁷ On this conceptual problem for international relations and political science, see S. Ulph, *Towards a Curriculum for the Teaching of Jihadist Ideology, Part IV, Chapter Six. The teaching of jihadism in academic institutions*. The Jamestown Foundation.

⁶⁸ *Le Parisien* (France), October 3, 2006.

As a universalising message, everyone is entitled to engage in this critical exercise, to intervene with their own voice on how Islamic doctrine is being applied or instrumentalised in a contemporary, globalised world.

The question is: how to engage? On a broad level, Lafif Lakhdar argues, this engagement is already taking place. From his perspective on comparative religion and the Clash of Chronologies (“their past is our present, and their present is our future”⁶⁹), he maintains that we are already fully interconnected:

Everyone who studies Islam and its historical personalities in comparative religion, irrespective of his nationality or creed, is a participant in the reform of Islam. Even studies on Jewish and Christian texts and their historical symbols participate indirectly in the reform of Islam.

On matters more directly doctrinal, westerners and non-Muslims naturally have a somewhat large learning curve ahead of them. All the more reason, it would logically appear, to follow closely the unfolding of the debate where it is being conducted at its most internal, by digesting the writings of these progressive Muslim thinkers, who have already carried out the necessary ‘bridging function’ by becoming culturally bi-lingual, and who are therefore able to discourse with authority on what is shared and what is particular.

The problem of course, is gaining access to this debate. As you would expect, the contest in the Middle East is being fought out in Arabic – on blogs and websites and in the printed media (less commonly in the audio-visual media). Their names are therefore mostly unknown to the Anglosphere, and their courage in confronting the Islamist advance, often at high risk to themselves, is passing all but unnoticed amid the strident voices of pro-Islamist state-funded spokesmen. So it is all the more important that these progressive voices are translated for a global readership. The isolation and precariousness of their position demands that their profiles should be promoted in the West and their work financially supported.

The *Almuslih* website – which is the source of many of the excerpts adduced here – is an initial step in responding to this need. It aims to promote a two-way traffic through its publication in two languages, Arabic and English, and raise the profile of these Arab voices of reform by translating their articles into English. As a window onto the trench warfare taking place I would highly recommend this type of publishing model for removing the impediments and popularising the discussion. The enthusiastic reception it has received from Arab writers points to how initiatives such as these can provide a promising response to Lafif Lakhdar’s request for an institutionalisation of the reform message in both the Arabic and English-speaking worlds.⁷⁰

Some might claim that Westerners lack the cultural context to make sound decisions as to what constitutes the parameters of reform in the Muslim world. If so, who could seriously doubt that observing how one constituency of intellectuals negotiate the parameters courageously and untrammelled by self-doubt, is a good way to get up to speed to engage fully ourselves?

At the very least, we will be able to avoid undoing their good work.

⁶⁹ See H. Saleh, [The Passing of Lafif Lakhdar, the Arab Voltaire](#), *Almuslih*.

⁷⁰ It may be providing a model, judging by Lafif Lakhdar’s call for “the support of civic society through establishing a website – on the model of *Almuslih* – which would translate into Arabic the most important works on Islam by western and international Islamologists.” The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*.