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Islamic Modernist and Reformist Discourse in South Asia

Since the mid-nineteenth century, South Asian Muslim scholars and thinkers have contributed greatly to the development and dissemination of Islamic reformist and modernist discourse. Ideas and methodologies developed by such thinkers as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, and Fazlur Rahman have helped reformist thought to flourish throughout the Islamic world, and their legacy still inspires Muslim reformist thinkers from Turkey to Malaysia.

South Asian reformist thinkers' contributions are acknowledged by Muslim and Western scholars of Islam, and they all agree that the emergence of Muslim modernist reformers in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent was a momentous event with far-reaching consequences. These scholars, however, hold different opinions about the nature and relative importance of the factors that caused this important development.

Some Western scholars have seen this phenomenon as representing a reaction to British presence and rule in India and influences emanating from this presence. But different scholars have accorded varying degrees of importance to different aspects of British influence. Bruce B. Lawrence has attributed it "mainly to commercial expansionism emanating from north-western Europe,"¹ while H.A.R. Gibb has stressed the impact of British education on India's Muslim elite.²

Some contemporary Muslim scholars have also considered influences resulting from British presence as significant in the generation and evolution of Islamic modernist and reformist discourses in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. Other Muslim scholars, by contrast, have attributed this phenomenon mostly to developments within Islam itself and particularly Islam in India. For example, Fazlur Rahman acknowledged the impact Western political and economic expansionism and its educational system on Muslims. He noted that, under the influence of European education, many educated Muslims came to perceive "the Muslim society as an inert mass suffering from a reaction to the Western impact at all levels."³ Yet he perceived the modernist movement essentially as the continuation of the pre-modern

Islamic reform movements, and not “primarily the result of the West’s impact.”⁴

Clearly, the historical and sociopolitical context of post-Mughul India, including the impact of British education, made some form of reaction to British colonialism inevitable. Islamic modernist discourse was one of these responses. As in other Muslim societies, in India, too, responses to the multifaceted British influence and challenge have spanned the spectrum from (a) total rejection of these influences and the advocacy of a strict observance of Islam, later followed by the development of Islam-based models of government and resistance to the British conquest; to (b) total embrace of European-style modernity; and (c) synthesis, represented by Islamic modernism.^{5*}

No doubt, many diverse factors were responsible for both the multiplicity of Muslim responses to the British challenge and to the emergence of reformist discourse in India. Yet it is undeniable that intrinsic aspects of Islamic tradition and of what Iqbal has called “the culture of Islam” were critical to the emergence and advancement of an indigenous and proactive movement of social and intellectual reform among India’s Muslims.

Notwithstanding their differences regarding the principal impetus behind the emergence of the Islamic modernist phenomenon, most scholars agree that “Islamic modernists advocate flexible, continuous reinterpretation of Islam,”⁶ in order to “reform” those aspects of Muslim tradition and law that have become outdated, fossilized, or harmful by scrutinizing those aspects in light of Islam’s normative sources—the Qur’an and the authentic *sunna*. This perspective sharply departs from the view that currently prevails in the West. This view sees Muslims as incapable of internal “reform” and holds that any change “for the better” in the Muslim world has to be imposed from outside.

Since the time of its pioneering figures, Islamic reformist and modernist discourse in South Asia has evolved in an uneven fashion. In particular, in the last three decades, there has been a resurgence of non-reformist and even extremist trends in South Asia. Conditions that have led to this development in South Asia are similar to those in other Muslim countries, including the authoritarianism of most post-independence governments; the disappointing results of modernization policies, which have not mitigated socioeconomic disparities; the manipulation of religion by political leaders; regional and international developments; and the continuation of conflicts such as those over Kashmir and Palestine.

The Soviet-Afghan and intra-Afghan wars have been particularly important in

*Editor’s Note: Among the religious leaders who advocated a strict observance of Islam and resistance to the British conquest was Shah Abdul Aziz (d. 1823). He declared India to be *dar al-harb* (a house of war, i.e., a land ruled by infidels). In response, Sayyid Ahmad Shahid (1786–1831) and Sayyid Ismail Shahid (1779–1831) launched a war of liberation and established an Islamic state that included part of present-day Pakistan’s North-West Frontier, where *shari’a* was enforced as the law of the land. In the twentieth century, Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979) developed the idea of the Islamic state and the Islamization of modernity.

strengthening extremist and militant tendencies in Pakistan. It is unlikely that these extremist tendencies, which are also found in the West and in other regions with non-Muslim populations, will be replaced with a culture of peace and moderation unless and until their underlying economic, political, sociocultural, and historical causes are adequately dealt with.

Yet despite the resurgence and strengthening of non-reformist trends, a number of Muslim scholars in South Asia have continued further to develop and advance reformist and modernist readings of Islam. The work of some of the most important of these contemporary scholars will be the focus of this chapter. The analysis of their works will be preceded by a discussion of the ideas of the three pioneers of Islamic modernist, reformist thought in India and Pakistan, namely, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, and Fazlur Rahman. These authors are still relevant to reformist discourse in the entire Islamic world and they continue to inspire contemporary thinkers.

The thinkers discussed here have two salient characteristics. First, they all have struggled with issues of power and powerlessness, identity and assimilation, and modernity and traditionalism. Second, they have been determined to stimulate new thinking on contemporary issues and to demonstrate that Islam is a dynamic religion that calls for continuing intellectual review of both “normative” and “historical” Islam, in order to construct modern, enlightened, just, forward-looking, and life-affirming Muslim societies.

The Pioneers of Islamic Reformism and Modernism

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal were products of post-Mughul India, ruled by Britain. Under British rule, Indian Muslims’ social, economic, and political positions had been severely eroded. This reality had a profound impact on both thinkers’ intellectual development.

Sir Sayyid, whose family had lost its privileged position following the demise of the Mughul Empire, had been greatly impressed by the Europeans’ scientific, technological, economic, and educational achievements and their military and political successes. He wanted to show that Islam is compatible with scientific inquiry and hence capable of progress attained by Europe. He also correctly concluded that, without mastering modern sciences, Muslims would suffer further degradation.

The Sepoy Uprising, or the War of Independence as Indians call it, was a crucial event in the history of Indian Muslims and it deeply influenced the evolution of Sir Sayyid’s thinking. Most important, it convinced him “that the best of Western civilization could and should be assimilated by the Muslims because the ‘pure’ Islam taught by the Qur’an and lived by the Prophet was not simply unopposed to Western civilization but was, in fact, its ultimate source and inspiration.”^{7*}

*Editor’s note: This view is similar to Afghani’s opinion that Muslims had passed their scientific spirit to the Europeans.

In contrast to Sir Sayyid, Muhammad Iqbal belonged to a generation that was exposed to modern education. Having studied in British-ruled India, England, and Germany, Iqbal took a more critical approach to Western ideas and institutions than did Sir Sayyid. Iqbal did not reject positive aspects of Western civilization, but he did not support their blind emulation by Muslims. Instead he wanted to create a new intellectual framework for a more authentic Islamic modernity and searched for ways to regenerate Muslims and their civilization on the basis of their own religious and cultural heritage. It is this aspect of Iqbal's thinking that makes his discourse so relevant to those contemporary Muslim thinkers who are trying to balance the requirements of modernization with those of cultural authenticity.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernism: Philosophy and Methodology

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was born in 1817. On his paternal side, his family were descendants of the Prophet. They had immigrated to India from Herat in the seventeenth century. His maternal ancestors were originally from Hamadan in Iran. His early education was purely traditional. Later in Delhi he studied medicine and Islamic disciplines, including Greco-Islamic philosophy, and he published many original works and translated others. However, it was his experiences during the period 1858–70, especially his greater exposure to the structures of British political culture, that completed his “change to modernity.”⁸

An important aspect of Sir Sayyid's philosophy was his distinction between Islam as a divine religion, and Islam as lived by Muslims in different contexts throughout history and influenced by pre-existing cultures.* This underlying perspective led Sir Sayyid to argue, first, that reform requires the use of a scientific and historical methodology for reading and interpreting Islamic history and textual and other sources; and, second, that “the challenges of Western institutions could only be faced by remodelling Muslim interpretations of religion and history on the basis of modern science.”⁹

Thus Sir Sayyid developed “a scientific methodology of historiography” in his historical and religious works.¹⁰ His *Essays on the Life of Muhammad* (1870), written to refute the errors that Sir Sayyid saw in Sir William Muir's polemical *Life of Mahomet* (1858), is regarded as “the starting point of modern Indian historiography of Islam.”¹¹

Reason had a pivotal role in Sir Sayyid's philosophy and methodology. His rationalist mindset was partly due to his interest in Mu'tazili thought. However, unlike the Mu'tazila, Sir Sayyid regarded reason not as a faculty of mind but as

*Editor's Note: As demonstrated in various chapters of this volume and especially the one dealing with Iran, the distinction between historical Islam and spiritual Islam is a common thread running through the reformist discourse in different parts of the Islamic world. In this regard, then, Sir Sayyid was a pioneer.

a human function that gets “perfected by use.”¹² As he put it, “the error of one person is corrected by the reason of another and the error of an age by the future age.”¹³ Furthermore, he equated reason with understanding and considered it an acquired quality that enables human beings to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper. According to Sir Sayyid, who used terms like understanding, reason, and intellect interchangeably, “the only criterion for a person having ‘reason,’ ‘intellect,’ or ‘understanding,’ is behavioural rather than substantive.”¹⁴

In keeping with his rationalist mindset, Sir Sayyid stressed the importance of *ijtihad* and a rational interpretation of the sources of Islamic religious thought. He considered this necessary because he believed that unless Islam was presented in a rational way it would not be understood or accepted by modern Muslims. He also stressed the importance of relying on the Qur’an and sifting the false *hadith* from the reliable ones. He tried to remove “the corrosive elements” and accretions that he believed were seriously detrimental to Islam in his day.¹⁵

Sir Sayyid believed in the compatibility of religion and science, and he considered natural law and divine law to be the same, because he believed that there could not be disagreement between the word and the work of God. If there was an apparent contradiction between a scientific fact and a religious rule, then the latter had to be reinterpreted according to scientific evidence. Applying his naturalistic rationalism in his exegesis of the Qur’an, Sir Sayyid arrived at fifty-two points of divergence from traditionally accepted Sunni Islam.¹⁶ On the basis of his research, Sir Sayyid came to the conclusion that, “if we keep in view the principles deducible from the Qur’an itself, we shall find that there is no contradiction between the modern sciences, on the one hand, and the Qur’an and Islam, on the other.”¹⁷

Sir Sayyid considered it absurd to believe that God’s prophets appeared only in Arabia and Palestine and that other peoples were denied knowledge of the divine. A genuine believer in religious pluralism, he upheld that it was possible for the followers of any prophet from anywhere to achieve their religious goals. In the context of two of the world’s largest religions—Christianity and Islam—Sir Sayyid stressed the need to demythologize both religions so that they could be understood rationally and seen as being closely related to each other. He sought through writings and through action to convince both Christians and Muslims that their faiths required them to be friends and allies. Sir Sayyid may be considered a pioneer of what our age calls “interfaith dialogue.” Like the more liberal contemporary reformist thinkers, he worked for greater understanding and goodwill among Muslim sects and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Sir Sayyid had relatively progressive views on women’s rights and deplored the fact that the Muslim *umma* had not had the political will to implement women’s God-given rights. He opposed veiling but did not actively challenge it. Sir Sayyid recognized that the education of girls was a precondition for the development of Muslim society as a whole, but he was also aware of the sociocultural context in which he lived. He noted that “no satisfactory education can be provided for Muslim

girls as long as most of the boys do not receive proper education. . . . enlightened fathers, brothers, and husbands will naturally be most anxious to educate their female relations.”¹⁸

Given his admiration for British political institutions, it is reasonable to conclude that Sir Sayyid viewed democracy favorably, although his understanding of democracy, like that of Britain of the nineteenth century, was elitist.

Some South Asian scholars have questioned Sir Sayyid’s intellectual prowess as an Islamic thinker, noting contradictions in his philosophy. For example, Fazlur Rahman believed that Sir Sayyid “was not a keen religious thinker, nor perhaps primarily and deeply religious,” but “was led by the inner logic of the Muslim intellectual history to justify his cultural progressive attitude theologically.”¹⁹ Rahman considers the result of Sir Sayyid’s theological work as “chiefly negative: he produced an Islam that was not against modern scientific progress,” and states that, toward the end of his life, Sir Sayyid “was himself disappointed in the first crops that grew at ‘Aligarh’ (the Muslim university that he founded in 1857). These were gentlemen who wore Western dress, spoke English, prided themselves on a smattering of modern ideas but were either a-religious or anti-religious.”²⁰

Nevertheless, Sir Sayyid’s efforts to liberalize Islamic law have been regarded as a “dynamic and constructive” achievement that made “a tremendous impression” on modern Islam, particularly Indian Islam.²¹ Iqbal attributed his “real greatness” to the fact that “he was the first modern Muslim to catch a glimpse of the positive character of the age which was coming, and who felt the need for a fresh orientation of Islam and worked for it. We may differ from his religious views, but there can be no denying that his sensitive soul was the first to react to the modern age.”²²

Sir Sayyid’s Disciples

In addition to his own contributions, Sir Sayyid inspired others to adopt a reformist approach to the reading and interpretation of Islam. Three of his associates—Mulawi Chirag Ali, Mahdi Ali Khan (known as Muhsin al-Mulk), and Sayyid Mumtaz Ali—are especially worth noting.

Mulawi Chirag Ali: Advancing Sir Sayyid’s Reformist Agenda

Mulawi Chirag Ali (1844–1895) took an even more critical approach than did Sir Sayyid to the interpretation of the principal sources of Islamic law—with the exception of the Qur’an. He was particularly reluctant to accept *hadith* as a reliable source, mainly because *hadith* generally convey the sense of the Prophet’s sayings, but not his exact words; and because of the unreliability of the *isnad* (the chain of transmitters) of a *hadith*. Consequently, he dismissed all *hadith* whose content appear unsuited to current conditions. He also refused to accept the consensus (*ijma*) of the Muslim *ulema* because *ijma* is never complete and is rejected by some theologians and jurists at various epochs.²³

Like many contemporary Muslim reformist thinkers, Mulawi Chiraq Ali distinguished between spiritual Islam and historical Islam, or between Islam as a religion and Islam as a social system. In his view, Islam as a religion and spiritual system reflected progress and has “the vital principle of rapid development, of rationalism and adaptability.”²⁴ He further argued that “the Prophet did not compile a code of law; nor did he enjoin the Muslims to do so. He left it to them in general to frame any code of civil or canon law and to found systems which would harmonize with the times and suit the political and social changes.”²⁵

Mulawi Chiraq Ali maintained that most of Islamic law, especially as related to personal status and such practices as slavery, “should be viewed in the historical context of pagan Arab practices of that time” (the time of prophecy). He added that the Qur’an actually tried to moderate and eventually eliminate negative aspects of such practices, notably those related to women.²⁶ In short, like his mentor, Mulawi Chiraq Ali advocated a rationalist, dynamic, and humanist understanding of Islam, and at times adopted an even more progressive position than did his mentor.

Mahdi Ali Khan (Muhsin al-Mulk): A More Cautious Reformism

Mahdi Ali Khan (1837–1907) basically accepted Sir Sayyid’s philosophy and methodology and moved from imitation to interpretation—from *taqlid* to *ijtihad*. He does not reject *hadith* outright, but advocated great caution in its use as a source of law. Nor did he reject *ijma* (consensus of the *ulema*), but again he stressed that both *hadith* and *ijma* should be reviewed in light of modern sciences and ethics.

He departed from Sir Sayyid’s advocacy of natural theology, arguing that the laws of nature were constantly being reinterpreted by scientists. In his view, the Qur’an’s references to extranatural agencies such as angels and miracles in allegorical terms, indicated that it was possible to regard them as exceptions to natural laws. He held that it was God’s laws as revealed to the Prophet that were immutable rather than the laws of nature and society. His position is seen by some as a corrective to Sir Sayyid’s natural theology.²⁷

Sayyid Mumtaz Ali: Defender of Women’s Rights

Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860–1937) was the author of *Huquq-e-niswan* (The Rights of Women) and the co-founder (with his wife) of a journal titled *Tahzib al niswan* (The Manners and Etiquette of Women). Along with the Egyptian Qasim Amin (1863–1905), he may be considered one of the earliest defenders of women’s equality with men in any Muslim country or society.²⁸

In his book, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali stated all the traditional arguments used to “prove” women’s inferiority to men, and then refuted all of them by using a modern exegetical approach based on reason. He was a strong advocate of women’s education and rejected such practices as *purda* (segregation and veiling), polygamy, and forced marriages, which he considered to be unjust and injurious to women.²⁹

Muhammad Iqbal: Reconstruction of Islamic Thought

The poet-philosopher, lawyer, political activist, and social reformer Muhammad Iqbal was born in November 1877 at Sialkot, in the Punjab. In childhood, he was deeply influenced by his teacher Maulana Mir Hasan, a renowned scholar of Arabic and Persian, and later by Sir Thomas W. Arnold, whom he met at the Government College in Lahore. Iqbal obtained a master's degree in Arabic in 1890 and proceeded to Cambridge University in England where he studied philosophy under J.E. McTaggart. He graduated from Cambridge in 1907 and was called to the Bar in 1908. The same year he was awarded the Ph.D. for his thesis on *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* by the University of Munich, Germany.

Iqbal returned to Lahore in 1908 and took up legal practice. Later, he became involved in politics. However, his involvement in politics remained secondary to his other interests. Between 1915 and 1938, twelve volumes of his poetry—seven in Persian and five in Urdu—and his famous lectures on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* were published, making Iqbal the most important poet-philosopher of his time, not only in India but in the world.

Iqbal's Religious Philosophy: The Self and the Purpose of Life

Iqbal's philosophy of *khudi*, or self, built on his conviction that the fundamental fact of human life is the absolute, irrefutable consciousness of one's own being. For Iqbal, humanity's advent on earth is a great and glorious event, not one that signifies human sinfulness and degradation. To him the purpose of the cosmos is to serve as the basis and ground for the emergence and perfection of the self. He rejected the idea that humanity's evolution has come to an end. Iqbal believed ardently that human beings are the makers of their own destiny and that the key to destiny lies in one's character.³⁰ In his view, art, religion, and ethics must be judged from the standpoint of the self. That which strengthens the self is good and that which weakens it is bad.

E.M. Forster wrote of Iqbal that he believed in the self as a "fighting unit."³¹ Although humanity is the pivot around which Iqbal's philosophy revolves, as pointed out by A.M. Schimmel, Iqbal's "revaluation of Man is not that of *Man qua Man*, but of Man in relation to God."³² Iqbal saw his concept of the ideal person realized in the Prophet of Islam whose life exemplifies all the principles dearest to his heart. The most important teaching of Iqbal's religious philosophy is that a true seeker of God seeks not the annihilation but rather a more precise definition of one's own personality. Iqbal's ideal person does not retreat from the world but regards it as the training ground for spiritual development. Despite his attacks on what he called "degenerate Sufism," Iqbal belonged, as A.J. Arberry has stated, "to the history of Sufism, to which he made both scientific and practical contributions."³³ Iqbal did not deny his indebtedness to "higher Sufism," which did so much to check hypocrisy and artifice in religion. In a letter to Professor Nicholson, he stated that his

philosophy of *khudi* "is a direct development out of the experience and speculation of old Muslim Sufis and thinkers."³⁴ Eager as he was to purge Islam of all alien obscurantist elements, in formulating his own philosophy "not only did he turn back to Rumi and the medieval mystics to discover antecedents within Islam for the system for which he sought acceptance, but he casts his thoughts in the mould of Sufi allegory that has been sanctified by centuries of Persian poetry."³⁵

Iqbal's Epistemology

Following the Qur'an, Iqbal maintained that there are two sources of knowledge, the inner consciousness of human beings (*anfus*) and the outer world of nature (*afaq*). He mentioned the study of history, described by the Qur'an as "the days of God," as a source of knowledge. Equating scientific knowledge with *'aql* (reason) and mystic knowledge with *ishq* (love), Iqbal believed that without love, reason becomes demonic.

In Iqbal's view, nature does not confront God in the same way as it confronts humanity, since it is a phase of God's consciousness. God is immanent since God comprehends the whole universe, but also transcendent since God is not identical with the created world. All life is individual. There is a gradually rising scale of egohood running from the almost-inert to God who is the Ultimate Ego. God is not immobile, nor is the universe a fixed product. God is constantly creative and dynamic, and the process of creation still goes on. The Qur'anic saying "Toward God is your limit" (Sura 53: *al-Najm*: 42) gave Iqbal an infinite worldview and he applied it to every aspect of the life of humankind and the universe.

Iqbal and the "Reconstruction" of Religious Thought in Islam

Though much has been written by Muslims for Muslims in the modern period, according to H.A.R. Gibb "one looks in vain for any systematic analysis of new currents of thought in the Muslim world," since almost all the books written in English or French fall in the category of apologetics seeking either to defend Islam or to show its conformity to contemporary thinking.³⁶ In Gibb's judgment, the "outstanding exception is the Indian scholar and poet, Sir Muhammad Iqbal, who in his six lectures on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* faces outright the question of reformulating the basic ideas of Muslim theology"³⁷ and demands "a fresh examination of the fundamentals of Islamic belief."³⁸

Gibb describes Iqbal's lectures as "the first (and so far the only) thoroughgoing attempt to state the theology of Islam in modern immanentist terms."³⁹ He also perceived that the theology Iqbal was aiming to reconstruct was not the orthodox theology of Islam but the Sufi theology.⁴⁰

In the view of W.C. Smith, theologically Iqbal "wrought the most important and the most necessary revolution of modern times"⁴¹ by making God not merely transcendent but also immanent. He states: "The revolution of immanence lies in this,

that it puts God back into the world. Iqbal's God is in the world, now, with us, facing our problems from within, creating a new and better world with us and through us. Religion is life. And life, this mundane material life, is religious. The present world, of matter, time and space is good. . . . God himself, and all the values, rewards, ideals, and objectives of religion become transferred to the empirical world. Correspondingly, the will of God is not something imposed from without to be accepted resignedly, but surges within (and) is to be absorbed and acted upon."⁴²

For Iqbal, the reform of Islamic law is an integral part of the "reconstruction" of religious thought in Islam. According to Islam, the basis of all life is spiritual and eternal, and so in Iqbal's view a society based on this perspective was required to reconcile the categories of permanence and change.⁴³ While permanent principles are needed to give society "a foothold in the world of perpetual change," they must not be understood "to exclude all possibilities of change which according to the Qur'an is one of the greatest 'signs' of God."⁴⁴

What is eternal and what is changeable is exemplified for Iqbal in the life of the Prophet of Islam, who "seems to stand between the ancient and the modern world. Insofar as the source of his revelation is concerned he belongs to the ancient world; insofar as the spirit of his revelation is concerned he belongs to the modern world. In him life discovers other sources of knowledge suitable to its new direction. The birth of Islam . . . is the birth of the inductive intellect."⁴⁵

In Iqbal's judgment, one of the major reasons for the decline of Muslims in the past many centuries was their inability or unwillingness to subject the legal system of Islam to intellectual scrutiny, particularly with reference to *ijtihad*, which is one of the acknowledged sources of Islamic law. Iqbal refers to *ijtihad*—which "literally means to exert"—as "the principle of movement in the structure of Islam"⁴⁶ Seeking "the re-valuation and recodification of the Islamic Fiqh,"⁴⁷ he stressed the critical need for *ijtihad* by contemporary Muslims. Iqbal pointed out that the Muslim *ulema* wanted to exclude innovations in classical Islamic law in order to have a uniform social life, forgetting that in an over-organized society, individuals—on whom the fate of the community ultimately rests—are altogether crushed.⁴⁸

Challenging the notion that the gates of *ijtihad* were closed, he asked: "Did the founders of our schools ever claim finality for their reasoning and interpretations?" and answered this question with an emphatic "Never!"⁴⁹ His oft-quoted concluding statement reads:

The claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to reinterpret the foundational legal principles in the light of their own experience and altered conditions of modern life is, in my opinion, perfectly justified. The teaching of the Qur'an that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems.⁵⁰

While both Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Iqbal were strong advocates of *ijtihad*, their perceptions of *ijma* were very different. The former regarded it as "the exclusive

privilege” of the *ulema* and rejected it categorically.⁵¹ However, Iqbal regarded *ijma* as “perhaps the most important legal notion in Islam,”⁵² through which the dormant spirit of life in the Islamic system can be galvanized. In his opinion, in modern times, *ijma* is only possible when the power of *ijtihad* is transferred from individual representatives of schools to a Muslim legislative assembly where diverse persons with insight can give their input.⁵³

Iqbal's Views on Democracy

Iqbal was critical of some aspects of democracy, particularly Western democracy, which he saw to be a cover for many corrupt practices. The assumption that Iqbal did not believe in democracy rests largely on a verse he wrote in which he said, “democracy is that form of government in which persons are counted, not weighed.”⁵⁴ However, he did not reject democracy but was keen to reform it so that it would establish a just social order approximating the concept of the “Kingdom of God on Earth.”⁵⁵

Iqbal criticized Nietzsche’s belief in “an Aristocracy of Supermen.” He argued: “Out of the plebeian material Islam has formed a man of the noblest type of life and power. Is not, then the Democracy of early Islam an experimental refutation of the ideas of Nietzsche?”⁵⁶ In an essay on “Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal,” Iqbal said clearly, “Democracy . . . is the most important aspect of Islam regarded as a political ideal,” and added that “there is no aristocracy in Islam.”⁵⁷

Iqbal's Views on Women

In Iqbal’s view a woman’s most important role was that of a mother, and he likened Motherhood to Prophethood.⁵⁸ He considered it crucial for the moral health and development of a Muslim society that its women remain “pure” and expend their energy on being “good” wives and mothers. He was highly critical of the Western woman, whom he pictured as childless⁵⁹ and unwomanly due to her education.⁶⁰

Sir-Sayyid had opposed *purda* (segregation and veiling), even though he considered it politically inadvisable to become a passionate advocate for the rights of Muslim women. Iqbal supported *purda*, even though he was critical of the Indian Muslim custom of child marriage and polygamy⁶¹ and strongly urged Muslim women to fight for the enforcement of the rights given to them by Islam—for example, the right of inheritance. While he did not want to address “imaginary problems,”⁶² he was probably the first to notice the difficulties created for women who sought a divorce under the Hanafi law being practiced in India, and he encouraged Muslims to reflect on this issue.⁶³ Urging Indian judges to move with the times, he proposed “a lucid methodology” for resolving such “real” problems.⁶⁴

As early as 1904, Iqbal wrote that “The most sensitive issue in the reformation of social life is the rights of women,”⁶⁵ but he was well aware of the gap between Islamic theory and Muslim practice. His own views regarding the role of women

in society remained culturally conservative. This is disappointing, considering the fact that he was “the most daring intellectual modernist the Muslim world has produced.”⁶⁶ However, Iqbal’s philosophy of the self, grounded as it is in the egalitarian and justice-centered vision of the Qur’an, remains a source of inspiration and empowerment not only to Muslim men but also to Muslim women.

Fazlur Rahman: Pakistan’s Influential Reformist Thinker

Fazlur Rahman was one of the most important and influential Muslim reformist thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century. He was born in 1919 in the Hazara district of present-day Pakistan. He studied traditional Islamic sciences under his father, Maulana Shihab al-Din, a scholar of Islamic law, and pursued secular studies at Punjab University and at Oxford. He taught at the University of Durham and at McGill University, served as adviser to President Ayub Khan (1961–68), and directed the Islamic Research Institute. In 1968, a controversy was triggered by the publication in the Institute’s research journal *Fikr-o-nazar* (Thought and View) of an Urdu translation of a part of Fazlur Rahman’s book *Islam*. Under pressure from a countrywide protest launched by conservative *ulema*, Rahman was forced to leave the country. From 1969 to 1988 he taught at the University of Chicago, where he became the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor. He died in 1988.

Fazlur Rahman’s Philosophy and Methodology

In Rahman’s view, “the basic questions of method and hermeneutics were not squarely addressed by Muslims,”⁶⁷ although the medieval systems of Islamic law “worked fairly successfully.” This was largely due to the realism of earlier Muslims, who took materials from the customs and institutions of conquered lands and modified them where necessary in the light of Qur’anic teaching, with which they were integrated. But attempts to deduce laws in abstraction from the Qur’an—as in the area of penal law, *hudud*—proved to be unsatisfactory. This was because analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), the instrument for deriving law, “was not perfected to the requisite degree.”⁶⁸ Due to a failure to understand the underlying unity of the Qur’an, and the use of an “atomistic” approach that focused on isolated verses, “laws were often derived from verses that were not at all legal in intent.”⁶⁹

Rahman’s approach to the Qur’an is holistic and historicist. He argues that the Qur’anic perspective, which stresses the ideas of “a unique God” to whom all humans are accountable and the eradication of socioeconomic justice, is different from the existing realities of the Prophet’s time.⁷⁰ The Qur’an was a response to these realities, and for the most part gave moral and social directives for dealing with specific problems that arose in concrete historical situations.⁷¹ To substantiate his view, Rahman pointed out that in many cases the Qur’anic verse not only gives an answer to a specific problem, but also provides the reason for that particular answer.

Emphasizing the importance of “context” in understanding the real intent of the Qur’an and even *hadith*, Rahman observed that the Prophet’s biographers, the collectors of the *hadith*, and those who wrote commentaries on the Qur’an would not have preserved “the general social-historical background of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s activity and, in particular, the background (*shu’un al-nuzul*) of the particular passages, if they had not strongly believed that this background was necessary for understanding the Qur’an.”⁷²

Based on this contextualist perspective, Rahman proposed a process of interpretation that consists of “a double movement” from the present times to Qur’anic times, then back to the present situation. The first of the two movements consists of two steps:

1. Understanding the meaning of the Qur’an as a whole as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute specific responses to specific situations.⁷³
2. Generalizing those specific answers and enunciating them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be “distilled” from specific texts in light of the sociohistorical background.⁷⁴

The second movement takes one from the general principles of the Qur’an to the specific concrete sociohistorical context in which the former have to be applied.⁷⁵ Rahman believed that if the two movements are achieved successfully, “the Qur’an’s imperatives will become alive and effective once again.”⁷⁶

Rahman characterized the intellectual element in both movements as *ijtihad*, which he defined as “the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text or precedent in the past containing a rule, and to alter that rule by extending, restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by a new solution.”⁷⁷ In many respects, Rahman’s theory is not fundamentally different from the modernist, reformist ideas of Muslim thinkers of the past, notably Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal, who urged Muslims to “go back to the Qur’an,” and “go forward with *ijtihad*.” However, equipped with new analytical tools, Rahman was able to develop these ideas into a theory articulated in contemporary terms.

Fazlur Rahman’s Views on Revelation

Rahman presented his perspectives on revelation in his book *Islam*, first published in London in 1966. When the Urdu translation was published in 1968, it created great turmoil in Pakistan. Recounting these events, Rahman said in an essay (1976):

As I feared, the most crucial issue for controversy was about the nature of the Qur’an as Revealed Book. I defended the idea of the verbal revelation of the Qur’an, which is the universal Islamic belief. However, it seemed to me that the standard orthodox accounts of revelation give a mechanical and externalistic picture of the relationship between Muhammad and the Qur’an—Gabriel coming and delivering God’s messages to him almost like a postman delivering letters.

The Qur'an itself says that the Angel "comes down to the heart of Muhammad. I stated that the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God insofar as it is infallible and absolutely free from falsehood, but, insofar as it comes to the Prophet's heart and then at his tongue, it was entirely his word."⁷⁸

Rahman wanted to affirm both the external and internal aspects of revelation, as had been done by earlier thinkers including al-Ghazali, Shah Wali Ullah, and Iqbal, although "none of them had stated the position in such a clear-cut and blunt manner."⁷⁹ However, the Urdu translation of his view of revelation made it appear as if he was stating that the Qur'an was the joint work of God and Muhammad. Rahman tried to clarify his position, but the campaign launched against him by the conservative religious groups, particularly the Jama'at-e-Islami, became so intense that it intimidated the government. Rahman had to resign his position and leave the country. It appears that the conservatives took this opportunity to punish Rahman for his other reformist views on family law and on interest, which he defined as being different from usury (*riba*) and therefore not un-Islamic.

Fazlur Rahman's Views on Democracy

Rahman referred to the case of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, who was chosen by the elders from both the Meccan immigrants and the Medinese Ansar and endorsed by the entire community,⁸⁰ and acknowledged that he had received his mandate from the people who asked him to implement the Qur'an and the *sunna*.⁸¹ In Rahman's opinion, this "clearly establishes that the Islamic State derives its sanction from the Islamic community and that, therefore, it is completely democratic," but democracy can take various forms and be direct indirect, depending on the prevalent social conditions.⁸²

Rahman accepted the notion that, given Islam's underlying egalitarian ethos, governments must be based on popular will through some form of representation and does not think that it is un-Islamic to adopt modern democratic institutions.⁸³ However, drawing attention to the fact that the vast masses of Muslims are illiterate, he pointed out that it is not "easy to implement democracy under such circumstances."⁸⁴ Further, in view of the desire and need for rapid economic development, a common problem "in the under-developed countries, including all the Muslim countries,"⁸⁵ a strong government capable of a high degree of centralized planning and control of economic development is needed.⁸⁶ Therefore, Rahman saw "no harm" in having "strong men" at the helm of affairs in underdeveloped countries, "provided that, at the same time, the spirit of democracy is genuinely and gradually cultivated among the people."⁸⁷

Fazlur Rahman's Views on Women's Rights

In Rahman's view, the Qur'an recognized the full personhood of a woman and improved her status greatly in numerous ways. He pointed out that "the most im-

portant legal enactments and general reform pronouncements of the Qur'an have been on the subjects of women and slavery."⁸⁸ To substantiate this point, Rahman referred to several issues that are the subject of much Qur'anic concern and many prescriptions. These include: female infanticide, treatment of daughters, equality of men and women, conjugal relations, a wife's right to sexual satisfaction, family planning, gender segregation, divorce, polygamy, inheritance, and women as witnesses.

Rahman's views regarding women were more progressive than those of most Muslim exegetes. For example, in the context of women's testimony he observes: "to say that no matter how much women may develop intellectually, their evidence must on principle carry less value than that of a man is an affront to the Qur'an's purposes of social evolution."⁸⁹

Rahman was also the architect of Pakistan's Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961). This law laid down a procedure for and restrictions upon the contracting of polygamous marriages and a procedure for divorce. Although from today's perspective these reforms appear modest, the Ordinance to this day is denounced by the conservatives. However, despite his progressive views on many issues related to women and his emphasis on social evolution as a basis for changing certain laws that discriminate against women, Rahman's exegesis on women's rights often indicated a patriarchal mindset.

Muhammad Khalid Masud: Keeper of the Reformist Tradition

Muhammad Khalid Masud was born on April 15, 1939, at Ambala, East Punjab, and migrated with his family to Pakistan in 1947. Because of various family-related matters, including financial problems, he began his formal education only in 1950. Nevertheless, he succeeded in joining Punjab University in Lahore and later studied at McGill University, where he obtained an M.A. (1969) and a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies (1973).

Masud was affiliated with the Islamic Research Institute from 1963 to 1999, and he taught in France (1977), Nigeria (1980–84), and Malaysia (2003). From 1999 to 2003, he was academic director at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World in Leiden. In June 2004 he was appointed chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) which advises the Pakistani government on matters relating to Islam.

Masud has had an enduring interest in methodology and the impact of social change on Islamic law. In his master's dissertation he examined the *fatwa* dealing with legal problems for which there is no legal precedent and that could not be resolved within the framework of classical Islamic law. This led him to the works of the Maliki jurist Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388), who adopted the concept of *maslaha* as an independent principle: a method of inductive reasoning that takes into consideration the entirety of Qur'anic verses and *hadith*. According to Shatibi, something is lawful if it is supported by textual evidence and social practice. In

this framework of thinking, change is allowed in customs (*'adat*) but not in what is obligatory (*'ibadat*).

Khalid Masud's Philosophy and Methodology

In many respects, notably in its emphasis on context, Masud's methodology is similar to that of Fazlur Rahman. Masud also stresses the importance of linguistic analysis, requiring a thorough understanding of the Arabic of the time of revelation, and a holistic rather than piecemeal approach to the study of the Qur'an. He views the Qur'an and the *hadith* as basic Islamic texts. He does not consider the Qur'an a book of laws but acknowledges its normative character.

In Masud's view, *hadith* need to be recompiled in chronological order. To him, the main methodological problem involved in basing legal reasoning on *hadith* is that there is a large number of inauthentic *hadith*. Moreover, the way a *hadith* is reported in various collections, with fragmentation of "an event or the text of a *hadith* into several reports," its spread "into different chapters," and their repetition "obscures the unity as well as the historicity of the texts of a *hadith*"⁹⁰ and reduces its value as a basis for legal reasoning. He adds that for the *hadith* to be a credible basis for scientific reasoning it is necessary to collect all relevant *hadith* on a particular issue and place them in their historical context.

Khalid Masud's View on Democracy

Masud's view on democracy can be found in his article "Defining Democracy in Islamic Polity."⁹¹ After examining various views on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, he says that the real problem in this context is that, while most scholars speak about the participation of the people in the process of governance and some even ascribe sovereignty to the people, there is mistrust of common people. They are seen as incapable of governing themselves, although they may elect representatives from among the elite, wealthy, or learned, who then govern. Masud sees this mistrust not only in Muslim thinkers but also in Western supporters of democracy.⁹² But this is especially true in regard to Muslims, at least according to some scholars. He notes, for example, that according to Martin Kramer, "Muslims cannot be democrats unless they give up Islam." He concludes that the real issue in defining democracy is the place and value assigned to the common person as an individual—something not yet fully developed in the present political systems.⁹³

Khalid Masud's Views on Pluralism in Islam

In Masud's words, "Pluralism is a part of the project of modernity that favors the freedom of the individual. Pluralism does not stress multiplicity *per se* as much as it is concerned with questioning the traditional monopoly of certain persons, groups, or institutions on prescribing ethical values authoritatively."⁹⁴ Masud

maintains that Islam favors pluralism on two grounds: first, because it appeals to human reason, and the Qur'an attaches "pivotal importance to individual choice and responsibility"; and, second, the social acceptance of Islamic values as understood by different communities. This basis also "regulates the permissible scope of dissent from what are widely accepted social norms." Finally, he points out that early in its history Islam developed several approaches to moral issues and was never monolithic.⁹⁵

Khalid Masud and Review of the Hudud Ordinances (1979)

Masud emphasizes the importance of reforming *fiqh*, especially in regard to women and the penal code, as evidenced by his writings on ethics, human rights, *shari'a*, and society. Since his appointment as chairman of Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), he has faced his toughest challenge as a modernist, reformist scholar, and a social-change advocate. Under his leadership, the CII has taken a strong stand against some laws contained in the Hudud Ordinances promulgated by President Zia ul Haq in 1979, holding that they are contrary to the Qur'an and *sunna* and have been used to victimize women.

Masud wrote the Summary of the CII's Interim Report on the Hudud Ordinances presented to the Pakistani government on June 27, 2006. It concludes by stating:

The Hudud Ordinance does not conform fully to the Qur'an and Hadith. Partial amendments to this Ordinance cannot bring it to accord with the letter and spirit of the Qur'an and Sunna. A thorough revision of the Hudud Ordinance is necessary in order to make it more responsive to the philosophy of crime and punishment in the Qur'an and Sunna as well as more effective in a modern judicial system.

In light of the government's alliance with a religiously conservative grouping, the Muttahida Majlis-e-'Amal (MMA),* which is opposed to any review of the Hudud Ordinance, Masud was not hopeful that his or the CII's efforts would soon succeed in securing any significant changes. However, he continues to struggle.

Riffat Hassan: Theology of Women in the Islamic Tradition

An important development in the context of Islamic reformist discourse has been the emergence of Muslim female scholars who have tried to promote women's rights by providing a correct and dynamic interpretation of Islamic texts and laws. In Pakistan, this author has been part of this pioneering effort and an activist for Muslim women's rights.

*Editor's Note: The change in the makeup of Pakistan's parliament and government following the February 2008 elections ended this alliance. Nevertheless, conservative elements are still influential in politics and society.

Despite the existence of prominent women in early Islam, the Islamic tradition has largely remained rigidly patriarchal. Islamic sources underlying this tradition—the Qur'an, the *sunna*, *hadith*, and *fiqh*—have been interpreted almost exclusively by Muslim men, who have defined the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. Spurred by this male-dominated tradition on women and the promulgation of anti-women laws in 1983–84 by the government of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq under the cover of Islamization, this author became interested in studying the women-related Qur'anic texts from a non-patriarchal perspective.

The conclusion was that, if read without patriarchal bias, the Qur'an does not discriminate against women and is particularly concerned about safeguarding their rights. The analysis began with an examination of the theological ground in which all anti-women arguments are rooted and led to the identification of three theological assumptions on which men's alleged superiority to women rests, not only in the Islamic, but also in the Jewish and Christian traditions, namely:

1. God's primary creation is man, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib, hence is derivative and secondary ontologically;
2. Woman was the primary agent of man's "Fall," or expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence all "daughters of Eve" are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt;
3. Woman was created not only from man but also for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance.

Of these three questions, the first one pertaining to the issue of woman's creation is the most important one. If man and woman have been created equal by God, who is the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot become unequal, essentially, at a subsequent time. On the other hand, if man and woman have been created unequal by God, then they cannot become equal, essentially, at a subsequent time.

The idea that woman was created from man's rib comes from Genesis 2:18–24. It is totally absent from the thirty Qur'anic passages in which reference is made to the creation of humanity inclusive of women and men. However, the story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib became part of the *hadith* literature, including *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, the two most influential *hadith* collections in Sunni Islam. Theoretically, any *hadith* that conflicts with the Qur'an must be rejected—but this has not happened in the case of *hadith* collections that include the "rib" story, clearly contradicting Qur'anic teaching about creation.

Riffat Hassan's Methodology for Interpreting Islamic Texts

In developing "feminist theology" in the context of the Islamic tradition, the author did not find any ready-made hermeneutical model and developed her own methodology consisting of the following principles:

1. *Linguistic accuracy*, namely knowing the meaning of words, especially key terms, as understood at the time of the Prophet in Hijaz.
2. *Historical context*, namely knowing the larger social and historical background used by the Qur'an, as advocated by Fazlur Rahman and others.
3. *Philosophical consistency*. This is connected to the Muslim belief that the Qur'an is internally consistent. This means that "in investigating a specific topic the interpreter must take into account all instances where that topic is addressed in the text. Similarly, in attempts to understand a particular word, all instances where the word is used in the Qur'an must be considered."⁹⁶
4. *Ethical criterion*. This means that "the Qur'an must be interpreted in the light of God's intentions found in the Qur'an itself."⁹⁷ God's categorical self-statement in the Qur'an: "I do absolutely no wrong [literally: I am not a *zallam*—an emphatic form of *zalim*] to My servants!" (Sura 50: *Qaf*: 28)⁹⁸

This means that God can never be guilty of *zulm* (tyranny, oppression, injustice, wrongdoing). Since the Qur'an is God's word, it must reflect God's justice and "any specific passage in the text that seemingly condones 'injustice' has to be reinterpreted in a way that is consistent with this basic notion of divine 'justice.'"⁹⁹

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi: A Contemporary Reformist Thinker in Pakistan

Javed Ahmed Ghamidi was born on April 18, 1951, in Jeevan Shah village, near Sahiwal, a Punjab city. From a young age he studied traditional Islamic disciplines. In 1972, he achieved B.A. Honors in English literature from Government College University, Lahore. From 1973 to 1995 he was a pupil of Amin Ahsan Islahi (1904–1997), a noted Islamic scholar and exegete of the Qur'an who himself had been a student of Hamiduddin Farahi (1863–1930).

Islahi was one of the founding members of the Jama'at-e-Islami, a religious party organized in 1941 by Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979), considered by many to be a founding father of the global Islamic revivalist movement. Islahi parted from him after seventeen years, following a difference of opinion on the nature of the party's constitution. Ghamidi also worked closely with Maududi for about nine years before expressing his first differences of opinion, which led to his subsequent expulsion from the party in 1977. For Maududi, the establishment of an Islamic world order was the basic obligation of Islam; for Ghamidi, it is *servitude to God*.

Ghamidi is the founder-president of the Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Sciences. The Institute aims to continue the intellectual process initiated by Muslim scholars of the past because the element of human error can never be eliminated. In 1993, he fulfilled one of his greatest aspirations and founded a modern *madrassa*

the Mus'ab School System. The system is made up of a chain of schools spread throughout the country. The schools' objective is to produce students highly qualified in modern disciplines but also knowledgeable about what is best in their religion and culture.

Ghamidi is the chief editor of two monthly journals and has numerous publications. Since 1970 he has been delivering weekly lectures on the Qur'anic text in different venues. He gives lectures on aspects of Islam and is a popular speaker in programs arranged by television channels and local institutions.

Appointed a member of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), headed by Dr. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Ghamidi resigned on September 21, 2006, when the government formed a separate Ulema Committee to review the bill regarding women's rights. He said that this was a breach of the CII's jurisdiction. Furthermore, in his view, the amendments in the bill proposed by the Ulema Committee were against Islamic injunctions. Ghamidi's resignation was not accepted by President Musharraf, and he continues to be an active member of the CII.

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi's Approach to Interpreting Islamic Texts

Ghamidi developed his approach to interpreting Islamic texts (which he limits to the Qur'an and *sunna*) under the tutelage of his teacher Islahi, who based his exegesis on his teacher Farahi's thesis that the Qur'an has structural and thematic unity. Ghamidi distinguishes between the content of the Qur'an and its interpretation. While the former is immutable, the latter is always subject to critique and analysis.

In his view, the Qur'an, compiled and arranged by the Prophet under divine guidance, possesses *nazm* (coherence) at both the structural and the thematic level.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, each *sura* of the Qur'an is a complete unit in itself with its own structural, thematic, and linguistic features. In Ghamidi's hermeneutics, understanding this *nazm* has a direct bearing on interpretation, and primary importance is placed on *tafsir al-qur'an bi'l qur'an* (exegesis of the Qur'an through the Qur'an). These include *naza'ir* (clues) from parallel usage in the Qur'an, language, context, and theme.¹⁰¹

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi's Views on Governance and Democracy

Referring to Sura 42: *al-Shura*: 38, Ghamidi states that the style and pattern of the verse demands that an Islamic government should be established and maintained only through the consultation of the believers and should conduct its affairs in all cases on the basis of a consensus or majority opinion of the believers. He states that human beings need social order and political organization.¹⁰² To achieve this purpose, they should develop a social contract that creates a fair and righteous government. To succeed in this goal, humans need divine guidance. For Muslims this guidance is provided by the Qur'an and the *sunna*.

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi's Views on Women

In Ghamidi's view, while men and women are absolutely equal in their capacity as human beings, they have different responsibilities and obligations.¹⁰³ Since men and women are different, he thinks that a good society is based not on the principle of equality but on the principle of justice. Equality means that all persons should be dealt with equally, irrespective of their needs or abilities, strengths or weaknesses, while justice means that a person should be dealt with on the basis of his or her capabilities and qualities.

Ghamidi believes, that according to the Qur'an, man should be the head of the family for two reasons: first, because he is given the responsibility of earning the livelihood for the family; and second, because he is given the mental, physical, and emotional qualities that are more suitable for this responsibility. It is only in this sphere of the husband-wife relationship that God has given the man a degree of authority over the woman. Aside from this sphere, both are considered equal.

In Ghamidi's judgment, head covering for women is a preferred part of Muslim social custom and tradition, but it is not a directive of the *shari'a*.¹⁰⁴ A review of his views on women-related issues, such as women's testimony, indicates that patriarchal assumptions about women's role in society that color the analysis of the majority of Muslim exegetes may also be found in his work. However, despite his traditional background and training, Ghamidi is more "modernist" and "reformist" than most Muslim scholars, challenging some generally prevalent interpretations in what is the most sensitive of all subjects for most Muslims.

Asghar Ali Engineer: India's Reformist Scholar-Activist

Asghar Ali was born at Salumbar, Rajasthan (near Udaipur) on March 10, 1939. He belongs to an orthodox priestly family of Bohras who are Shi'a Isma'ili Muslims. His father, Sheikh Qurban Husain, was a scholar of Islam. Asghar Ali learned Arabic from his father, who also taught him *tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur'an), *ta'wil* (hidden meaning of the Qur'an), *fiqh*, and *hadith*. He also attended the municipal school where he acquired modern secular knowledge. He graduated with distinction in civil engineering from Indore, and served for twenty years as an engineer in the Bombay Municipal Corporation, thereafter taking voluntary retirement to devote himself to the Bohra reform movement. Due to his profession he came to be known as Asghar Ali Engineer.

Asghar Ali Engineer: Leader of the Dawoodi Bohra Reform Movement

From an early age, Engineer upheld the view that a truly religious person could not support an unjust order or remain silent in the face of gross injustice. He pointed out that "the faithful should bear in mind that absolute faith could lead to blind surrender to an authority which leads to highly exploitative practices."¹⁰⁵ He believes that

a religious person has to continue “to wage jihad against all forms of exploitation and injustices. Even a religious establishment can become highly oppressive and one must fight against such oppressive religious establishment.”¹⁰⁶

From 1972, Engineer began to play a leading role in the Dawoodi reform movement, which protested against what it perceived to be the exploitative practices of the Bohra leader Sayyidna Burhanuddin. Engineer was one of the reformers who set up the Central Board of the Dawoodi Bohra Community to conduct the reform campaign. The reformers defined themselves as believing Bohras and stated that their sole concern was for the Sayyidna and his family to strictly abide by the principles of the Bohra faith and end their authoritarian and tyrannical control over the community. Engineer devotes a great deal of his time to the reform movement, which he has internationalized through his writings and speeches.

Yoginder Sikand has observed “In the course of the struggle against the Sayyidna, Engineer developed his own understanding of Islam as a means and a resource for social revolution. One can discern in his thought and writings a multiplicity of influences: Mu‘tazilite and Isma‘ili rationalism, Marxism, Western liberalism, Gandhism, and Christian liberation theology, and the impact of the Iranian ‘Ali Shariati as well as Indian Muslim modernists such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal.”¹⁰⁷

Engineer’s involvement in the Bohra reformist movement led him to make contact with other progressive groups in India and internationally. He has done a great deal of work on communalism and communal violence in India since the first major riot in India in Jabalpur in 1961, and he has written extensively about Hindu-Muslim relations. In 1997 he was awarded the first National Communal Harmony Award by the Government of India.

Asghar Ali Engineer’s Philosophy and Methodology

Engineer’s view of the relationship between reason and faith is stated in an article titled “What I Believe,” in which he states: “A careful study of the Qur’an makes it very clear that revelation is in no way contradictory to reason. Both, in fact, are complementary to each other and one is incomplete without the other. While reason helps us understand the physical aspects of this universe (whole development of natural sciences depends on human intellect), revelation helps us find the ultimate answers to our origin and destination. While reason is an important source of enrichment of our material life, revelation is necessary for our spiritual growth.”¹⁰⁸

In Engineer’s judgment, the Qur’an emphasizes four important teachings: (1) *‘adl* or justice, (2) *ihsan* or benevolence, (3) *rahma* or compassion, and (4) *hikma* or wisdom. He believes that “a person must be just, benevolent, compassionate and wise in order to be a good human being. Mere performance of certain rituals cannot qualify one for being a spiritual person.”¹⁰⁹

Engineer’s methodology is based on the twin principles of rationality and justice, reflecting his affinity with Mu‘tazili thought. He also believes in distinguishing between the essence of religion (*din*) and its interpretations.

On the question of secularism, Engineer states that both non-Muslims and orthodox Muslims feel that Islam is not compatible with secularism because in a secular state there is no place for divine laws. Orthodox Muslims also think that secularism is atheistic and atheism has no place in Islam, which puts great emphasis on faith in God. They feel uneasy with the very word "secularism," which pertains only to matters of this world, whereas Islam attaches great importance to life hereafter. Also, since there is a well-developed *shari'a law* that most Muslims consider to be divine in origin, the very notion of secular law is unacceptable to them.

In Engineer's opinion, the sacral and the secular should not be treated as being mutually antagonistic but as being complementary to each other. He stresses the need to maintain a balance between reason and faith, which are both of fundamental importance to human existence. In his opinion, if reason does not become arrogant and faith does not become blind, then secularism can coexist with Islam and other religions. Engineer thinks that secularism should be taken in a political rather than in a philosophical sense, and he states: "Secularism in a political sense creates a social and political space for all religious communities."¹¹⁰

Engineer believes in the democratic spirit of Islam as exemplified by the Qur'anic emphasis on the principle of *shur'a*, or governance by mutual consultation. He points out that Islam accepts freedom of conscience as a fundamental human right. He substantiates Islam's acceptance of religious pluralism by referring to the Qur'anic teaching that all prophets are to be revered and to the example of Prophet Muhammad, who provided equal social and religious space to all religions present in Medina through the Covenant of Medina. Engineer states that Islam expressly upholds respect for human dignity and human rights, which are regarded as core characteristics of secular democracy. Furthermore, he thinks that a democratic form of government that strives to establish a just society reflects the spirit of Islam, which is profoundly concerned about safeguarding the human rights of all peoples, especially those who are socially or politically marginalized or disadvantaged.¹¹¹

Engineer is an advocate of women's rights and argues that, from a Qur'anic perspective, women and men are equal and women should not be regarded either as inferior or as subordinate to men. Keeping in mind the egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an and the principle of justice, Engineer advocates the revision of discriminatory laws pertaining to women.¹¹²

Yoginder Singh Sikand: A Moderate Muslim Voice in India

Yoginder Singh Sikand was born in October 1967 in Bangalore, India. He received his M.Phil. in sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and his Ph.D. in history from Royal Holloway, University of London. His doctoral thesis on Tablighi Jama'at has been published by Orient Longman. He completed his postdoctoral work on "Islamic Perspectives on Inter-Faith Relations in Contemporary India" at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, in Leiden, The Netherlands.

In February 2007, Sikand converted to Islam and is now teaching at Jam'ia Millia in Delhi. A prolific writer, he has published many books¹¹³ and contributed numerous articles on Islam and Muslims in contemporary India to publications ranging from learned journals to popular periodicals and daily newspapers. The primary focus of Sikand's academic work has been in the disciplines of economics, sociology, and history. But as shown above, he has also studied many aspects of contemporary Islam, particularly in the context of India, and has written about it. He is a progressive intellectual who aspires to give a balanced account of issues pertaining to Muslims. Sikand is committed to promoting a dialogue among religiously diverse groups. While Sikand's work is at a different level from that of the modernist, reformist thinkers discussed in this chapter, his writings have generated a discourse that encourages open-mindedness, moderation, and tolerance among Muslims and between Muslims and people of other faiths.

Conclusion

To do full justice to the work of South Asian modernist, reformist thinkers would require more space than is available in this chapter. Nevertheless, the foregoing account presents compelling evidence of the enduring significance of their ideas.

Reference has been made here to the retrogressive trends and activities of recent decades which have sought to undermine if not reverse the progress made by modernist reformist thinkers, not only in the context of South Asia, but also of the Muslim world in general. No doubt, today's modernist and reformist Muslim thinkers face great difficulties and even danger as they continue to disseminate their message. In some way this message echoes the rallying-cry of Muslim modernist reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely, "Go back to the Qur'an and go forward with *ijtihad*."

The progressive spirit of the historic Aligarh movement founded by Sayyid Ahmad Khan for the intellectual, moral and social regeneration of Indian Muslims, and which Iqbal enshrined in the hearts of millions through his passionate poems, remains a source of inspiration and empowerment for those who want to create communities and societies that embody the highest ideals and best practices of Islam.

Charles Dickens opened his great novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with the following unforgettable words:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.

The times we are living in today are reminiscent of these lines from Dickens. A fierce battle is raging between reformist thinkers and their opponents, a battle to

capture the hearts, minds, and souls of Muslims, especially young Muslims. The outcome of this battle depends on how well contemporary Muslims understand, internalize, and actualize the message of reformist thinkers such as the ones referred to in this chapter.

Internal and external forces casting a shadow over the Muslim world are impelling a significant number of people in the direction of extremism and life-negating attitudes and actions. Despite these challenges, it is this author's conviction that the voices of reformist thinkers, with their forward-looking, life-affirming vision, will prevail over the negative forces. This conviction is not based on naive optimism but upon the author's lived experience both as a thinker and as an activist.

Notes

1. Bruce B. Lawrence, "Islam in South Asia," in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 2, p. 282.
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