

## **Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam**

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PRESENTATION

**(This translation form the German original into English has been checked by the author.)**

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# **PROGRESSIVE THINKING IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM**

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## **1. Introductory background: Islamic renewal**

It seems sensible to start by shedding light on the background context and then to define the broader framework within which the "progressive thinking" in contemporary Islam which we want to discuss is embedded. The movements and trends which are shaping the contemporary Islamic world can be analyzed and assessed in the light of two conflicting forces, namely the notions of authenticity on the one hand and modernity on the other. Such an approach perceives contemporary Islam as being torn between the authenticity in matters of life and doctrine which it derives from its past and the modernity which refers it to a present (and a future) in which Muslims no longer hold the reins of power and are therefore no longer able to control the development of thought.

Islam is centred on a scripture which it holds in faith to be the revelation of God. This scripture, the Qur'an, is believed to be eternal and immutable in form and content and thus to be valid for every place and time, to contain a truth which obtains for ever. Modernity, by contrast, is characterized by the relativity and the progressive nature of all truth. For the modernists there is nothing, spoken or written, which cannot be construed and questioned, which cannot and indeed should not be further refined by the human mind. Islam thus sees itself positioned between the authenticity of a truth – that of the Qur'an as a – so to speak – naked, irrefutable fact – and a modernity whose knowledge in all fields is constantly being reconstructed. Is the solution to be found in modernizing Islam or in Islamizing modernity? It is the task of the Muslims to answer this question.

However appealing this approach may be, it has the disadvantage of not delving below the surface. It contrasts an authenticity which is Muslim with a

modernity which is impacting on Islam exclusively from outside. In addition, this approach via the question of an identity under threat from outside is an invitation to either pull up the drawbridges or even – so to speak – go into "exile". Both alternatives are rejected by a large majority of Muslims. If there is to be a debate between the various tendencies, then it should and must be nourished from elements which are rooted within Islam. It must arise from Islam itself and its inherent tensions. When looking for an appropriate approach, it therefore seems sensible to include the twin notions of the letter and the spirit. The merit here is that the analysis comes from and remains located within Islam itself.

Three main trends seem to be alive and well in the Islamic world. Against the backdrop of a *cultural* Islam there exists an *Islamist* Islam, i.e. an Islam of the letter. In addition there is an Islam *in the process of re-interpretation*: an *Islam based on the spirit of the letter*.

*Cultural* Islam (one could also say *traditional* Islam; by contrast, I consider the term "Volksislam", i.e. "popular Islam" to be highly inappropriate) is understood to be Islam as it is believed, experienced and practised in a given society. It represents a kind of humus which nourishes the entire community, a potential bestowed on all Muslims. A Turkish Muslim, for example, sees himself as Sunni in terms of his understanding of the Qur'an but Hanafi in his interpretation of the law. This does not, however, mean that there do not exist countless tendencies and groupings in Turkish Islam that are little "orthoprax" (i.e. abiding by mainstream formulation of Islamic law): popular Sufi orders, veneration of saints and magic practises on the part of uneducated khojas and persons under their influence, practices which not uncommonly draw on elements of pre-Islamic and extra-Islamic, local and neighbouring cultures and are peddled as being Islamic. All these elements, taken together, we refer to as *cultural* Islam. This Islam is in close contact

with the civilization and milieu to which it belongs. It makes these a Muslim community. In all certainty it contributes to the sense of balance, order and harmony of each individual Muslim. For the individual Muslim it is a reference system, a language, a way of thinking, a code of values and conduct – in a word, the culture of a genuinely extant Muslim society.

Against the backdrop of this cultural Islam, an Islam has emerged which is a strict observant of the *letter*. This Islam is often referred to today as "*Islamism*". Present in admittedly various forms, it dates back a long time. Throughout its history it has repeatedly produced tangible regimes and movements whenever a society felt the need to react – usually in order to fend off non-Islamic forces. Not uncommonly it therefore has an inherent tendency towards the radical.

The circumstances which explain the current revival of Islamism are legion. Deep down there is undoubtedly the predominance of the so-called "west", but at the same time there is the decline of the political power of the Islamic world and the concomitant humiliation of the *umma*. Immediately apparent is a crisis which is simultaneously economic, cultural and political – in other words a development crisis. This crisis is driving a number of groups to mobilize in search of a comprehensive improvement of their situation.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that eradicating the causes of this frustration would automatically lead to the demise of Islamism and ultimately to its integration into "cultural Islam". After all, anyone who makes the transition from cultural Islam to Islamist Islam is following a certain and systematic dynamic. The doctrines and commandments believed to be Allâh 's revelation are interpreted by the Islamist literally, and the Islamist commits himself to implementing them effectively in the public

realm *tels quels*, as they stand, if necessary through political militancy and exceptionally even through terrorism.

Can this Islamic logic of radical loyalty to the letter be explained with more precision? Allāh is the master and the lord. Subordination is his unconditional due. He handed down his Scripture, to which obedience is owed. The Qur'an and the sunna – the exemplary actions and words of Muhammad as recorded in the "healthy" (i.e. reliable) hadiths - are the basic texts and the founding texts. They are to be interpreted literally without excuse or spurious compromise. Religion sets out a code of conduct which has to be followed strictly. The Islamic community is instructed to "enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong" (e.g. Q. 3:104). By virtue of this commandment, Muslims are obliged, in all areas of life, to be active defenders of the good and warriors against evil, with good and evil being defined by the sharia, itself based on the Qur'an and the sunna and rationally deduced from this basis.

Thus a connection between Islamism and Islam does actually exist. Although they are not identical and should be clearly distinguished from each other, in the eyes of some (and here and there even many) Muslims, Islamism is not an incorrect or misleading Islam but more a complete, perfect Islam. For its adherents, Islamism is not only that which Islam stands for but the truth of Islam to which all must convert.

At the same time, today we see the emergence, more than ever from "cultural Islam" but also, antithetically, from the conscious experience of contemporary Islamism, of an *Islam of re-interpretation* or an *Islam in the process of being re-interpreted*. We call it thus because it undertakes to re-open "the gates of the *idschtihād*" (i.e. the personal striving for fresh interpretations based on the basic and founding scriptures), gates which have been believed to be more or less locked since the middle of the 10th

century. The originality of the *idschtihād* is to be found in the courage to reconsider and reformulate earlier juridical rulings and theological doctrine, prescriptions which seemed to be unambiguously and definitively true for almost a millennium.

What applies to Islamism applies here too: the various tendencies and movements are so numerous that a full classification would only confuse the issue. The defining feature of all these new approaches is that they address themselves to the meaning of the founding scriptures of Islam and try, in cognizance of the risks and hazards inevitably incurred by such an undertaking, to identify the spirit behind the letter.

This "Islam according to the spirit" is today not at the front of the socio-political and socio-religious stage, or at least not in the way that the movements of an Islamist persuasion are. But its efforts are clearly visible and not uncommonly in line with the aims and views of the broader population. Undoubtedly this "Islam according to the spirit" still leaves far too much unsaid and some things even deliberately vague, partly out of fear of aggressive accusations from Islamists and also from the undemocratic potentates who use cultural Islam to preserve the *status quo*. But this "Islam according to the spirit" could ultimately hold the key to the future because it responds flexibly to the challenges of modernity without denying continuity with at least some of the historical understandings of Islam.

Muslims everywhere are today engaged in an internal Islamic debate on Islam. Torn between the traditional practices and ideas of *cultural* Islam on the one hand and the influence and attraction of *Islamist* Islam or the Islam *of re-interpretation* on the other, the devout and educated Muslim has no alternative to asking himself what kind of Islam he wants for his children. Moreover, more and more Muslims find themselves in a transition to a

“critical” religion, i.e. a religion which is determined ever less by social milieu and instead is marked increasingly by the independent choice of the individual.

## **2. Aim and delimitation of the topic. Clarification of terms**

Undisputedly therefore the phenomenon just alluded to does exist: a *new* Islamic thinking. But what else does this *newness* entail? It is a contemporary Muslim thinking which sees all manifestations of what we refer to as Islam and Islamic as being subject to *change*, as changing and developing realities. It is therefore not – to emphasize this point – not a thinking which subscribes to the ideology of progress. Indeed, this thinking certainly also embraces the possibility of regression, provisionality and possible errors, in particular with regard to one's own thinking. As a result it accepts the need for permanent self-criticism and indeed calls for such self-criticism. The new thinking furthermore aims for a deconstruction (*nota bene*: not destruction or demolition) geared to the goal of enabling every Muslim and every honest person "to come closer, free from any form of ideological manipulation, to the truth of the Word of Islam in order then to better appropriate this truth informed by a sound knowledge of the reasoning and background." (BENZINE. 2004, p. 13)

The progressive thinkers do however conceive of “modernity” in ways significantly different from the approaches of early reformers (of the late 19th and first decades of the 20th century). They are not satisfied with using reason simply as a universal and self-evident criterion but instead see reason as a socially constructed ability and thus as an ability which exists within a variety of practices and different discourses on theory.



They believe: "At the heart of modernity one finds the idea of the individual free to act, free to discover, whose experiments can penetrate the secrets of nature and whose strivings, together with those of others, can contribute to the shaping of a new and better world." (BENZINE. 2004, p. 17) In other words: the new progressive thinkers see modernity critically and in the style of a distinctive, individual consciousness of freedom.

Nasr Hamid ABU ZAYD wrote in *Al-Ahram* in 2002:

"We need an untrammelled exploration of our religious heritage. This is the first prerequisite for a religious renewal. We must lift the embargo on freedom of thought. The area of the renewal should be unlimited. There is no room for safe doctrinal havens in Islamic teaching, sacrosanct and closed to critical research. Such safe doctrinal havens constrain the process of renewal. They represent censorship, and this has no place in the history of Islamic thinking."

(ABU ZAYD. 2002. See: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002>).

Such an appeal incorporates the demand for freedom in general and for a social order which allows for such free thinking and does not violently suppress it. It also implies the hardly veiled reproach that those in power repeatedly instrumentalize religion for their own political purposes and are in this respect indeed comparable with Islamic fundamentalists.

Open, scholarly criticism of the "religious phenomenon" and the "religious discourse" is new to Muslim societies. Advocates of the new thinking are therefore repeatedly branded as "apostates". They and their views are unpalatable for the establishment because they concern not only specifically theological issues but also contemporary problems such as relations between the Islamic religion and the state, the interaction between the sharia and the positive law of modern states (particularly human rights and the

emancipation of women), and then of course also very tangible local issues such as the Islamic view of the relation between belief and social justice or the question whether an Islam-specific, firmly defined social system or political system is a component of Islam.

It would however be a major mistake to concur with the reproach repeatedly uttered by the opponents of this new thinking to the effect that the latter is uncritically bound to western criteria and has blindly become addicted to the west and its value system. For this new thinking, modernity does not mean "western modernity". On the contrary, it defines modernity as – so to speak – the critical light that modern knowledge has generated. The protagonists of progressive thinking thus advocate that when studying Islam and interpreting its scriptures, there is a need for unrestricted and critical account to be taken of the modern social sciences (linguistics, semiotics, comparative religion and not least sociology).

The advocates of progressive thinking do not form a school, nor do they all study the same issues. None the less we can concur with Rachid Benzine: "They are brought together by the fact that in their search for independent insight they want to study the Qur'an, Islamic tradition and Islam in general, always respecting the requirements of university scholarship and making use of the exact methodologies of scientific study." (BENZINE. 2004., p.18).

Of the many advocates of such thinking, the following are mentioned by way of example: Mohamed Arkoun (Algeria / France); Abdul Karim Soroush (Iran); Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid (Egypt / Netherlands); Abdou Filali-Ansary (Morocco); Abdelmajid Charfi (Tunisia); Farid Esack (South Africa / USA); Ebrahim Moosa (USA); Asghar Ali Engineer (India); Abdullahi an-Naim (Sudan / USA); Amina Wadud (USA); Fatima Mernissi (Morocco); Leila Babès

(France); Khaled Abou El Fadl (USA); Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia); Farish Noor (Malaysia); Ömer Özsoy (Turkey) ...

### **3. The more recent historical context of progressive thinking**

*Tajdīd* (renewal) and *nahda* (cultural awakening, renaissance) of Islamic thinking developed from the end of the 18th century on during a time when Muslim populations were subject to political and colonial dependence on the west. Political liberation has occurred since then, and Muslims have also had experience of dictatorship and corruption in their own Islamic-dominated societies. Admittedly the dependence of these societies on the west has not been removed entirely but exists today in new forms. In addition, an increasing percentage of Muslims live as minority communities in states with non-Muslim majorities.

Like the Islamists, the advocates of progressive thinking are also to a certain extent the product of democratization and more accessible university education. A few professional theologians may be among them, but their number is small. It is certainly true that the progressive thinkers include relatively more people with a humanities background than the Islamists, whose ranks are known to include a majority of persons with a scientific or technological background. The progressive thinkers are convinced that it is not sufficient to modernize Muslim societies in the fields of science and technology without at the same time probing the corpus of traditional religious interpretations.

Fazlur Rahman, to whom the new thinking under review here owes many decisive ideas, wrote in the epilogue to the second, expanded edition of his book *Islam*, published in 1979: "At the moment Islamic intellectualism is virtually dead, and the Muslim world offers the uninviting spectacle of an

enormous intellectual desert with wild troughs within which no thought stirs and a deathly silence prevails, though there is on occasion something which seems to resemble the twitch of a wing. This is the community for whose young generation Muhammad Iqbal beseechingly prayed some four decades ago [beginning of the 1930s]:

*"May Allâh guide your intellect into a [new] storm,  
for there is hardly a ripple in the waters of your seas!"*

Rahman continued:

"Why has the half-century since Iqbal's death been so sterile? One answer may be this: the Muslim world has been totally occupied over the past 50 years with liberation struggles against western colonialism and thereafter with reconstruction programmes. Though it is also true to say that when people are under enormous pressure and faced with new challenges their creativity attains unusual heights. What kind of reconstruction would result if intellectual reconstruction and spiritual regeneration had no or only a minor role to play in it?" (RAHMAN. 1979, pp. 263-264)

The enormous pressure from new challenges, combined with the recent acceleration of the secularization process in Muslim milieus, societies and states, has become so strong that it has inspired progressive thinkers everywhere. For some, personal experience also played a role: experience of Islamist regimes (such as those of the Mullahs in Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan) and of the fight by Islamist movements against dictatorial regimes and the latter's defence of the status quo.

Virtually all progressive thinkers are committed to considering the place of religion in a world which, despite all appearances to the contrary, is becoming increasingly secular. The process of secularization came upon the Islamic world fairly suddenly – overnight, so to speak – without its having

undergone an inner maturing process which would have prepared it for the impact. This process confronts Muslim thinkers with the question: how should religion, i.e. a reality deemed to be immutable, be reconciled with change?

Abdolkarim Soroush (born in 1945) has examined this question for considerable time and with radical scholarship. His answer is this: all the sciences and all fields of knowledge are in a state of ongoing transformation. Changes in one field of science necessarily lead to modifications in other fields, including in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Step by step Soroush has developed a "Theory of the extension and contraction of religious knowledge". Proceeding from this theory he has arrived at the conviction that the boundaries for the development of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) have to be constantly expanded, and that the development process itself also has to take account of developments which have taken place in other religious spheres. (See: SOROUSH. 2002)

In the view of the progressive thinkers, an unprejudiced, fresh reading of the basic scriptures of Islam is the only way of reconciling the core values of Islam with the demands of modernity in all their many variations. Only such a re-interpretation will pave the way for movement in jurisprudence; only thus will it be possible to ensure an adhesion of Islam's political thinking to democracy and human rights in a spiritually and intellectually coherent manner, and only thus will it ultimately be possible to bring about gender equality – all this with a clear conscience regarding the Qur'an and the sunna and in critical discourse with the critical thinking of modernity.

#### **4. Selected ideas and arguments of the new thinking**

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss individually the modern Muslim intellectuals cited above or to track the most important intellectual milestones in this new thinking in a manner which does justice to all. Instead I will present a selection – undoubtedly a somewhat random selection merely for the purpose of illustration – of arguments concerning just a few of the basic questions which seem relevant to our discussion. I emphasize that my selection of authors should not be understood as a kind of pecking order for progressive Muslim thinking as a whole.

#### **4.1. What is Islam? – A civilizational tradition in progress**

Ahmet Karamustafa, a lecturer on religion at the University of Washington, examines a fundamental question repeatedly raised by the progressive thinkers, namely: what is the definition of Islam? His portentous answer can be summarized as follows. The term "religion" cannot be applied universally to Islam because of its vagueness and ambiguity. It misleadingly suggests that Islam is an unambiguous and clearly delimited reality. Moreover, Islam cannot be identified with any of the various human cultures, and the diverse cultures which identify themselves as Islamic are all Islamic and cannot be ranked hierarchically on the basis of the amount of Islam they are judged to incorporate. This leaves us with the widely used definition of Islam which proceeds from the prescribed practices known as the "five pillars". But this definition is likewise unsatisfactory because the only element of these "five pillars" which, on close and critical inspection, is seen to inform the identity of all Muslims is the *schahāda* (i.e. the brief avowal of faith: "There is no deity except Allāh"). Anyone who rejects this is indeed not a Muslim, though it should be said that interpreting the *schahāda* is a matter left to the individual. This definition of Islam based on the *schahāda* has merit only if and to the extent that it is embedded in a civilizational framework. In other words – and this takes us on to the positive formulation of Karamustafa's

thesis: Islam does indeed have as its core certain key ideas and practices, but what is important is to grasp the dynamic spirit in which these core ideas and practices are constantly negotiated by Muslims in concrete historical contexts. One should not, therefore, reify them in a rigid formula which is both unhistorical and idealistic. In still other words: "Islam is a civilisational project in progress; it is a developing civilisational tradition which constantly releases from its melting pot innumerable alternative societal and cultural blueprints for human life on earth." (KARAMUSTAFA. 2003, p. 109)

From this perspective of Islam, Karamustafa draws the following conclusions. If Islam is thus perceived as a civilisational project, it presents itself as a dynamic, developing phenomenon which cannot be reified or defined in any way. This insight and reality should be celebrated instead of denied, in unrealistic and utopian fashion, with the Islamist call for the building of "the true Islam" and for the "politico-ideological unification of all Muslims".

Seen from this angle, it is easier to identify and promote Islam as a truly global tradition, as a tradition which does not need to distance itself from any specific race, language or culture. In other words: by emphasizing the global character of Islam, we are able to value Islam's transcultural, transethnic and transnational – i.e. humanistic - dimensions.

Moreover: thus seen, Islam is an interactive and inclusive tradition. This tradition takes root in the cultures with which it comes into contact. It reshapes these cultures and reforms them from within in a manner which means that numerous Islamic cultures exist on the globe, all equally Islamic and all equal partners in building and renewing the Islamic civilizational tradition.

#### **4.2. Critical Islam – beyond mere apologetics**

One of the most prominent advocates of progressive Islamic thinking now teaching in the United States, Ebrahim Moosa of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, identifies some characteristic features of progressive thinking by differentially comparing it with the thinking of the Islamic modernists of the 19th and 20th centuries. The latter perceived modernity as their ally and, importantly, they attached high priority to rationality. Reason as a criterion seemed to them to be their best weapon in their dispute with the west. They also deployed this weapon in their fight against all forms of superstition and degraded popular belief. Moreover, they believed that reason as a criterion would make them independent of all external religious authorities, be they in Sufism, theology or jurisprudence. Finally, they believed that by using rational methods they would be able directly to discover for themselves the original Word of the Qur'an.

These thinkers, however, took only scant note of the critical light of modern knowledge which had been developed in the modern humanities. Their ranks included only few intellectuals who were able and willing to apply the insights of critical scholarship in history, literature, sociology and psychology to interpreting the Qur'an and the hadiths, to history, social structures and the understanding of theology and jurisprudence. They were informed by the understandable fear that total acceptance of modernity as a philosophical tradition would dissolve Islam as a belief. At the same time they still held the conviction that pre-modern epistemology with its roots in classical dialectic theology (*'ilm al-kalām*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) could withstand erosion by modernity or was even compatible with the best of modern epistemology. Their intentions here were undoubtedly sound, but there was also naiveness at play insofar as most reformers viewed modernity and its philosophical heritage as a mere tool to explain and promote the pre-modern tradition and



the pre-modern understanding of religion. This shows that they either failed to recognize or completely misread the full implications of modernity.

Ebrahim Moosa cautions that the quest for a new and credible analysis which ventures beyond the positions set out above should avoid making two errors in particular which are characteristic of the modernist literature. The first is reification. This entails reducing and transforming living, subjective experiences and practices to make them fit into a series of concepts, ideas and things. For example, in relation to the earliest phase in the history of the Muslims it is not uncommon for reference to be made to the "spirit of Islam" as if this corresponds as equal to justice, equality and humanism as individual or combined qualities; as if these represent the very nature, the essence of Islam on the basis of which everything else and all that was to come later can be understood. Nothing, however, is presented to show exactly how, whether and, if so, to what degree these ideals were actually manifested in the practices and behaviour of the early Muslims.

Secondly, there is a need to abandon the apologetic attitude which still prevails today. This attitude produces arguments which gloss over or airbrush out certain elements of patriarchal structures, lifestyles and convictions which are sanctioned in the Qur'an and the hadiths. Acting on a false inferiority complex vis-à-vis the present, when confronted with history and its critical understanding, the response of the apologists is to flee. Muslims of this leaning gave little credence to the legitimacy of their own experience of the present and refused to act on this experience as a trigger and justification for innovation, change and adaptation. This reportedly has to do with a pathological belief in the superiority of the past and with the inability of a majority of Muslims to see the present, with its formative roots in the Enlightenment and the modern humanities, as an opportunity for Islam.

### 4.3. Resisting the authoritarian in the quest for the moral

In his book *Speaking in the Name of God* (ABU EL FADL, 2003), Khaled Abou El-Fadl, a lawyer lecturing at the UCLA School of Law, presents a critical investigation of the ethical foundations of the Islamic legal system wherever this, largely as he suggests, has degenerated into an authoritarian interpretation of the Qur'an and the hadiths – with fatal consequences for sections of Muslim society, in particular women. Abou El-Fadl fears that this authoritarian character bestowed on Islamic jurisprudence by Salafi and Wahhabi theory and practice not only robs Islamic jurisprudence of all integrity and respectability but is also an almost insurmountable hurdle to implementing and developing Islamic law in the modern world. Abou El-Fadl argues that in the light of the apologetic stance of the activists and the paralyzing dogmatism of today's legal experts, only very little remains of the rich and complex heritage of Islamic jurisprudence. If this jurisprudence now mainly represents a methodology for a consciously religious lifestyle in search of the divine and a process of weighing up and juggling the core values of the sharia in search of a morality to guide one's life, then one must accept, Abou El-Fadl says, that this jurisprudence has decayed – even to the point of extinction - over the past three centuries, in a process which was particularly rapid in the second half of the 20th century.

On the impact of Islamic prescriptions on women, Abou El-Fadl draws a particularly devastating conclusion. He directs his criticisms at, *inter alia*, the rulings of the Permanent Council for Scientific Research and Legal Opinions (C.R.L.O.), the official institution in Saudi Arabia mandated with drawing up Islamic legal expertises and a body with powerful global influence in promoting "Salafabism", as Abou El-Fadl calls this leaning which combines

Salafism with Wahhabism. At issue are rulings such as those which ban a woman from visiting her husband's grave, from praying aloud, from driving a car, from travelling without a male companion – all based on the argument that such conduct would automatically be an unacceptable temptation to men. These rulings, in Abou El Fadls' view, are –to put it mildly – morally problematic. If men are so weak and impressionable, why should women have to pay the price for their failings?

Because no legal system operates in a moral vacuum, Abou El-Fadl suggests that Muslims must give serious thought to the ethical concepts which should inform contemporary Islamic law. What is invoked or produced by its legal provisions? If, as is claimed, these provisions have nothing to do with religion but are instead the product of the respective totally patriarchal socio-cultural environment, Abou El-Fadl is totally in agreement, but he thereby assumes a different meaning and arrives at a probably unexpected conclusion: "It would be dishonest to claim that these provisions are not backed up by the Islamic sources because, as set out in this book, they are backed up by a number of traditions and precedents. One could, however, justifiably argue that these provisions are not compliant with Islamic ethics ... "(ABOU EL-FADL. 2003, p. 270)

If Islam is a universal Word, Abou El-Fadl argues, then its discourse on issues of ethics and justice should be intelligible and reasonable beyond the narrow limits of any specific legal culture within a particular cultural environment. He does not defend the idea of introducing a general, universal law, nor is he in favour of abolishing cultural specificity. But to serve Allâh surely means to serve justice, and serving justice necessarily means to stand up for the just, the moral and the humane.

#### **4.4. The need for a drastic reform of Islamic law regarding the right to free self-determination in religious matters while fully respecting the rights of others**

A. A. An-Na'im, a scholar originally from Sudan but now living in the United States, considers that he, particularly because he is a Muslim, is not able to accept the law of apostasy as part of Islamic law. If the predominant understanding of apostasy remains valid, a Muslim could be punished if he expresses opinions in a given Islamic country in which those opinions are considered to amount to the offence of apostasy. For example, from certain Sunni perspectives, the opinions of many Shi'ites amount to apostasy, as indeed do the opinions of many Sunni from certain Shi'ite perspectives. If the sharia law of apostasy were to be applied today, it is indeed possible that Shi'ite Muslims would be condemned to death in a country with a Sunni majority and vice versa. That this is not exaggeration becomes clear from a dispassionate review of history right up to very recent times.

But An-Na'im goes further: as long as the public law of the sharia is seen as the only form of law which is really valid in the Islamic sense for Islam, it is virtually impossible for the majority of Muslims to contest any of the principles or resist execution of that law, however repulsive and inappropriate they might consider it to be. The sharia was "constructed" by Muslim legal scholars in the first three centuries, i.e. although the sharia is derived from the fundamental, divine sources of Islam, Qur'an and *Sunna*, in itself it is not divine for it is the product of human interpretation of those sources. Moreover, this process of constructing the sharia via human interpretation took place within a specific historical context which was drastically different from the context which prevails today. It should therefore be possible for contemporary Muslims living in today's historical context to embark on a comparable process of interpreting the Qur'an and

the *Sunna* and thereby develop an alternative public law for Islam which is appropriate for application in our times.

"It is my conviction as a Muslim", An-Na'im writes, "that the public law of the sharia does not represent the law of Islam which contemporary Muslims are mandated to implement in fulfilment of their religious duty." (AN-NA'IM. 1996, p. 187) He proposes a reform of the methodology which reflects the "evolutionary principle" and other fundamental ideas of his mentor, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. But, An-Na'im cautions, "irrespective of whether this particular methodology is accepted or rejected by contemporary Muslims, there can be no doubt that a drastic reform of the public law of the sharia is necessary." (Op. cit., p. 186)

## **5. The fundamental challenge: a hermeneutic reading of the Qur'an**

The progressive - or "new" - thinkers of contemporary Islam remind us time and again that the Qur'an is a scripture for all people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The Qur'an speaks to all people, and reading this scripture and hearing it read aloud is intended to be a challenging experience and an invitation to believe. Moreover, as M. Arkoun emphasizes, insofar as the Qur'an, especially today, is *"invoked by millions of believers to legitimize their behaviour, to support their struggles, to justify their aspirations, to nourish their hopes, to strengthen them in their beliefs, to endorse collective identities in the face of the uniforming forces of the industrial civilization"* (ARKOUN.1982, p. 1), understanding much of our world presupposes an adequate understanding of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is and remains one of the scriptures which inform the memory and the imagination of humanity.

The progressive thinkers are now consciously addressing the issues which arise for the Qur'an from contemporary insights and the academic discourse.

How, some of them are asking, can one really gain access to, and grasp, a scripture which is so complex, a scripture which bears witness to a portrayal of the world and a sensitivity which in some respects is so radically different from ours? Their response to this challenge is to apply the historico-critical method, which aims to bridge the time gap between the reader and listener of today and a scripture dating back to the 7th century. The historico-critical method tries to place the text into the context within which it was written. It sees the Qur'an as a part of history. It is the Word of Allâh, but the Word has a historical dimension, the historical dimension of its "incarnation" in text form (the nature and structure of the text), as R. Bezzine describes it. This existence in text form allowed the discourse to develop a network (*maillage*) structure (composed of words, statements, oracles, which came, so to speak, into the heart and from the tongue of the Prophet), and then to take the form of a script which subsequently became a scripture. (See: BENZINE. 2004, p. 278)

Seen in this light, therefore, Allâh introduced his Word into a human language and culture. People then collected "the Word" and reproduced it in a bound volume of pages, the *mushaf*, which is known to have been the product of a collective endeavour. According to this new view, the Qur'an therefore does indeed speak of eternal truths, but it conveys them in the forms of a particular and non-universalizable culture, namely that of the Arabs of the Hejaz of the 7th and 8th centuries.

Others strive to understand how the scripture functions, how it "speaks", given that this divine discourse in "human language" presents itself as a corpus of texts. A corpus of words and sentences which rhetoric interweaves and binds together. The Qur'an is thus simultaneously a literary masterpiece, an ethical and symbolic discourse, and a chronicle, but it is also very much a discourse of parables and fables, and sometimes, though in relatively little

detail, it is a legal code. Various literary styles can therefore be found in the Qur'an, each depending on the message which it seeks to convey.

Today, a proper reading and understanding of the Qur'an also calls for the application of the principles of scholarship in linguistics and literature. A number of new thinkers have focused on this aspect, particularly the Egyptian literature scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (born in 1943), who currently lectures at Leiden in the Netherlands. Of all the methodologies available to literary scholarship, the rhetorical and narrative analyses in particular allow the believer to take the text of the Qur'an in its definitive version and apply the necessary updating. The literary forms of the Qur'an are important, for they provide information on how the text as it stands was "used" within the context of its appearances, its "coming down" as the Qur'an itself terms it, and what functions it fulfilled. Sometimes a teaching function predominates, sometimes a function of cult and ritual, elsewhere it is "only" the "exquisite" word of Allâh which is audible. Literary style is the key to discovering which particular momentary concern any given passage sought to address.

However, whether in the case of the Qur'an or of any other text, understanding the Qur'an requires more than an understanding of the backdrop for the text (the anthropology, archaeology, epigraphy, political, social and cultural history of the environment in which the text is embedded), and more than an understanding of its literary structure (its vocabulary, grammar, styles, and its links with the languages which preceded and surround the text). Reading and understanding a text must likewise not be reduced to knowledge of the history of the formation of the text. The meaning of the text is to be discovered primarily via a combination of all the above, of all that we find around the text, within the text and in the reading – and thus in the reader of the text. Because if it is true that a text

which remains unread exists in just the same way as a text which is read, it is indeed the reading or the hearing of the written word which breathes life into that text.

The hermeneutic studies thus reveal the polysemous character of the Qur'an, because the act of reading is itself – so to speak – the producer of the knowledge and the meaning. Reading or hearing read aloud is indeed first and foremost the activity of the reader or the listener. There can be no reading/hearing without a reader/listener. The meaning of a text is to be found primarily in the reader/listener. To deconstruct a text in order to see how it "works" is fascinating and interesting. But such a "mechanical" approach is not adequate to grasp the meaning of that text. A text is enlightening for the reader or listener only when it, or at least a part or an aspect of it, coincides with what the reader or listener has himself experienced. The reader/listener is the person who, little by little, identifies the threads through the fabric of the text which give him a taste of it.

From the above it follows that no approach to the Qur'an – or any other comparable text – exists, or only through the prism of a particular culture, the culture of the reader/listener. Any understanding, even the most profound, always remains shackled to the imperfect character of the reading, the prejudice (or bias) which every reader has. Any reading is a re-reading, a *re-lecture*, i.e. a reading within a situation, a contextual reading. Seen from this perspective, there are no methods which might enable one to draw the only, the "objective" meaning of any given text. The Qur'an cannot be reduced to a single perspective, that via which it is read. There is no reading which is the only accurate one and valid in perpetuity.

## **6. Some concluding remarks**



## **6.1. Historico-critical method and religious belief**

For progressive Muslim thinking, academic scholarship and literary analysis are not in conflict with a devout, religious approach to the Qur'an. Indeed – as the thinkers themselves say – academic analysis perfects and enriches the latter and provides them with an intellectually reliable basis. Academically researched information on the texts does not in itself provide an adequate religious understanding of the revealed Word. It seeks to and indeed can, however, help to ensure that the meaning and thus the true religious significance of the text for today is understood and given the appropriate weight within the revealed Word as a whole.

By highlighting the symbolic and mythical dimension in the discourse on the Qur'an, the progressive thinkers are emphasizing just how much the Qur'an represents an eternal truth. There is no religious culture without myths. Mythical history symbolizes what we are today and where we are going. The Qur'an is of enduring significance because it tells stories which tell the believer his own stories. Not every event reported in the Qur'an has in itself a significance which extends beyond the time when it occurred. But these events as narrated in the Qur'an can be related time and again to life today and tomorrow, both individual and collective.

## **6.2. The new critical methodology and its significance for genuine spirituality**

When we speak here of an adequate, new methodology for interpreting the Qur'an, this not only has significance for the epistemological and thus intellectual aspect but we are also touching on the rank of belief and

devoutness in Islamic theology and Muslim religious thinking. Indeed, there exists a kind of attitude and, corresponding to it, an exegetic method which subordinates understanding the text of the Qur'an as such not only to the hadiths but practically even to the deductions of the legal and doctrinal codifications and which thus causes the believer to confine himself in his appreciation of the text to that which is strictly useful. When this occurs, his appreciation does not extend beyond applying the text to the legal and doctrinal issues which currently stand as being in need of resolution. The greatest danger here is that this type of appreciation engenders an attitude to the Qur'an which is geared in a certain way only to its usefulness. This mentality leads to a "narrow" belief. Muslims of this mentality become aware in the Qur'an only of the utilitarian and superficial aspects..

The particular feature of a belief which is formed within the matrix of this mentality and methodology is that it is inspired by a sense of unassailability and repetition, in other words that it remains untouched by the internal vacillations of the believer, by the believer's questions and doubts and also by his desire for a personal spiritual path. Here, the dynamics of the faith come to a halt at the primary and superficial necessities. Everything beyond these will be perceived as temptations which should best be repressed. With such a perspective, the faith concentrates on that which is certain and on the calmness bestowed by repetition of that which has been prescribed in the past. In the event of a crisis this leads to two consequences: indifference or violence. Indifference in those whose weakness of conviction has made them incapable of responsibly making any genuine effort; violence in those who believe that the zenith of devoutness is to display a stubborn determination to defend the literal meaning of the prescriptions as well as the shape of established systemic relations – whatever form the actual manifestation of this endeavour to preserve and defend these may take.

The exegetic method, which is the choice of the other viewpoint, proceeds critically and historically and can thus restore to the revealed Word the vitality of its language, its symbols and, by extension, its spiritual and intellectual power. This probably creates space for a different style of belief, one which is founded on a sense of assuredness allowing the belief to remain open-minded to questions and contestations, one which is proud of the breadth of the mission of the Qur'an, and one which is confident that this breadth can inspire in the believer an enhanced sense of humility and openness to others, whoever these may be and however they may define themselves.

This exegetical view and method has emerged in modern times because of a gradual evolution which has taken place in Islamic thinking. It is informed by the human and social sciences, by the questions which these raise and by the changes which these have to address. It suggests creative forces which a contemporary Moroccan Sufi sums up in the following brief statement: "As far as the text is concerned, the ongoing revelation of the Qur'an (*tanjīm*) has indeed attained its goal. This is not the case, however, with regard to its meaning." (Cited in: ENNAIFER. 1998, p. 105)

### **6.3. "Who speaks in God's name?" The question of consensus and doctrinal authority**

Some three years ago, at a discussion event bringing together Muslim and Christian thinkers to explore the subject of "Building bridges", which was organized by the Archbishop of Canterbury and held at Lambeth Palace in London, Prince El Hassan Bin Talal of Jordan publicly expressed the following view: if in the next few years Sunni Islam fails to find the ways and means of speaking with one voice on important issues of faith and the practice thereof

(i.e. including the sharia), then it has virtually no chance of long-term survival as a religion in the modern world.

Whether or not this is the case, two questions – explicit or implicit – are the constant companions of progressive thinkers in contemporary Islam. The first is: "How does God speak?" and the second is: "Who speaks on God's behalf?" All those who by a process of random selection have expressed their views in this paper –with the exception of Abou El-Fadl – have addressed themselves primarily to aspects of the first question. The views presented here of progressive Islamic thinking, however, today inescapably invoke the second question more than ever before: "Who speaks on God's behalf?" For as soon as the relatively unambiguous basis of the Qur'an in its literal interpretation or in the interpretation given to it in the first two centuries is no longer seen as sacrosanct and definitive and departs in the direction of a personal interpretation of the spirit of its letter - whatever this direction may be and irrespective of how it is justified - , instantaneously the question arises as to the legitimation of such a new and continuously new interpretation. At the same time it would be difficult not to hear another question, that of the yardstick and criteria to be applied for a true understanding of the Qur'an and, by extension, the revealed Word of Allâh in our times.

Moreover, seeing Islam as a societal and political phenomenon raises the perennially new question of consensus (ijmā'). Does the Islamic community have a theologically substantiated doctrine, a theological "ummatology", so to speak, and what role is it expected to play - and how in practical terms – in the matter of determining the will of Allâh in questions of faith and ethics as they apply to today and to defend these determinations with authority? After all, is it not the case that those who defend the classical ideas on the authority of the Prophet and the Word of Allâh which he revealed on the one

hand and those who radically call that authority into question on the other are, in the final analysis, arguing for the right to claim for themselves the authority of the Prophet and the scriptures through which the Word of Allâh is revealed? Or have I, as a mere observer of the internal Islamic debate, in raising these questions missed the point?

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