Islamic Groups and their World-views and Identities: Neo-Traditional Salafis and Progressive Muslims

Adis Duderija*

PhD candidate
School of Social and Cultural Studies
University of Western Australia

Abstract

This paper presents a snap-shot discussion on the origins and the world-views behind two global contemporary movements among Muslims, namely Neo-Traditional Salafis and Progressive Muslims. It endeavours to historically situate and position them in relation to the cumulative Islamic historical harvest and delineate their approach to modernity. Additionally, the paper briefly examines the concept of the role and the function of women within these respective world-views. Finally, it analyses the implications of the underlying ideology of these movements on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in both Islamicate and non-Islamicate societies.

Keywords

contemporary Islamic groups, Progressive Muslims, Salafism, Qur'an, Sunnah, Hadith, Muslim women

Introduction

Before an analysis of the origins and the world-views of these two contemporary global Muslim groups is presented, a brief note on the methodology adopted in this article as it pertains to the defining of contemporary Islamic groups is in order. Defining a particular school of thought or an Islamic movement within the Islamic tradition(s) is fraught with problems.1 It raises the question of which criteria have the explanatory power

* To Farid Esack, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Ebrahim Moosa and Omid Safi whose life and works inspire mine.

to describe the contours of the movement in question and are able to
differentiate one stream of thought from another.

This article is based upon the premise that when defining and/or delin-
eating a particular Islamic movement or school of thought, one of the
most crucial factors to be taken into consideration are the differences in
methodological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions when con-
ceptualizing, understanding, and interpreting the Qur'an and Sunnah which
form the primary sources of the Islamic Weltanschauung. Also important
are considerations as to how these differences sit in relation to the larger
cumulative intellectual tradition of the previous and present communities
of interpretation. Another very significant factor to be kept in mind when
attempting to define and/or differentiate between various approaches to
interpretation of the Islamic tradition is that, as Kurzman argues, various
'socioreligious interpretations' of the Islamic tradition 'overlap and inter-
twine and should not be considered mutually exclusive or internally homoge-
 nous but as heuristic devices which provide insight into the history of Islamic
discourse'.

The last criterion to define a particular Islamic group and their
school of thought is their approach to modernity and its episteme.

In order to understand the world-views and identities of contemporary
Islamic groups, the various approaches to conceptualizing and interpreting
the primary sources of Islam are highly relevant for several reasons. Firstly,
the world-views and identities of various Islamic groups are primarily based
on their interpretation of the primary sources of the Islamic Weltanschau-
zung, namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah. These sources are uniformly
recognized as the ultimate points of reference on whose basis, in the past as
well as in the present, a variety of interpretive communities across the
Muslim ideological divide have based their world-views. However, the
often-invoked formula of 'going back to the Qur'an and Sunnah' has

---

3 Few Muslim groups, such as the nineteenth and twentieth century Ahl-Qur'an groups
in the sub-continent—or their contemporary ideological sympathizers, the so-called propo-
nents of a 'Qur'an only' approach to interpretation of the Islamic tradition—have rejected
the concept of Sunnah as being normative because of their rejection of Hadith. In their
minds these two concepts, as according to the classical Islamic scholarship, were conceptu-
ally the same. Hence the rejection of the concept of Sunnah as a source of Islamic Law and
theology. See D. Brown, Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought (Cambridge,
1996), 38-39. For the difference between Hadith and Sunnah see A. Duderija, 'Toward a
new Methodology of Sunnah', Arab Law Quarterly (2007), 1-12.
become a cliché phrase in contemporary Muslim discourse. Throughout the Muslim historical experience the phrase has been an ideological battle-ground in terms of whose understanding, definition, nature, and scope of these (textual) sources is the most representative of God's Intent/Will and the Prophet's (s) bodily interpretation of it. Indeed, this slogan was often used to 'provide doctrinal, ideological or geo-political theme used by peripheral Muslim groups against a central power'. Secondly, the ideological conflicts between Muslims for Qur'ano-Sunnahic4 legitimacy inherited from the past are once again resurfacing and have become much more potent and intense, occurring on a broader scale due to the communication and information technology revolution, which now includes the western Muslims in such affairs. Thirdly, the internal battles for an 'authentic Islam' that are currently going on within Muslim communities are resulting in an increased polarization along ideological lines, especially in the post 9/11 era. Fourthly, the increased ideological affinity of the Muslim youth with what we term the Neo-Traditional Salafi (NTS)-like worldview,9 such as in the case of some Muslim Student Association subcultures,10 can set in motion powerful socio-religious or political movements which have the potential to further increase suspicion, tension and even open conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The emergence of groups such as Al-Qa'eda, Al-Hizb al-Tahrir, Al-Muwahidin and

---

4 For a useful insight and overview of some of the major approaches to interpreting Qur'an and Sunnah see D. Brown, Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought, 38-42.
6 By the phrase Qur'ano-Sunnahic (rather then Qur'an and Sunnah) I wish to emphasize the hermeneutically symbiotic relationship that existed between the two concepts during the formative period of Islamic thought. See A. Duderija, 'Toward a New Methodology of Sunnah'.
9 Explained shortly in the subsequent part of the article.
10 O. Safi (2003), 307; see also O. Roy and T. Ramadan, European Muslims (Leicester, 1999).
Al-Muhājirūn among Muslims in Western liberal democracies is a clear manifestation of the presence of such currents, not only in Muslim majority countries but also in the West.

Lastly, the highly attractive, simply and persuasively formulated ‘epistemological promise’ of being the sole custodian of true Qur’āno-Sunnahic teachings made by some contemporary Islamic groups\(^\text{11}\) gives substantial credence to their claims as they have largely succeeded in monopolizing much of the contemporary religious discourse.\(^\text{12}\) As such, they often find many a sympathetic ear among the Muslim masses who are not only economically, socially, and politically marginalized, but also alienated, frustrated, disempowered, and deprived, both in predominantly Muslim as well as in largely non-Muslim societies. These Muslims are often used for recruitment and indoctrination purposes (i.e. born again Muslims—as in the case of the notorious Syrian leader of Iraqi insurgency Aiman Al-Zarqawi or even that of Osama Bin Laden) and equipped with a certain understanding of Qur’āno-Sunnahic legacy which is then, in turn, utilized as an ideological springboard for furthering the ideological, political, and social agendas underpinning a particular group’s world-view.\(^\text{13}\)

1. Origins and World-view of Neo-Traditional Salafi Thought: A Brief Overview\(^\text{14}\)

Neo-Traditional Salafism (NTSm) is a contemporary Islamic movement whose world-view is based upon the Salafi-revivalist manhāj\(^\text{15}\) of interpretation of the Qur’ān and Sunnah. I have opted for this phrase to highlight several points which apply to its Qur’āno-Sunnahic methodology: ‘Salafism’

---

\(^{11}\) Such as the group I refer to as Neo-Traditional Salafis (NTS) described in the subsequent part of this article.


\(^{13}\) For a recent study explaining the mechanisms and reasons why Western Muslims decide to join radical Islamic groups see Q. Wiktorowicz, _Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West_ (Lanham, US, 2005).

\(^{14}\) A more in depth discussion on the origins and the worldview of NTS thought can be found in A. Duderija, ‘Religious Identity Construction in Australian-born Muslims Residing in Perth: The Case of Neo-Traditional Salafis and Progressive Muslims (forthcoming).

\(^{15}\) Here defined as a particular methodology of derivation, understanding, and application of Qur’ānic-Sunnahic bodies of knowledge. See also R. Al-Madkhalee, _The Status of the People of Hadeeth_ (Birmingham, UK, 2001), 65.
is framed within the larger umbrella concept of Salafism which I briefly explain in the subsequent part of this article; ‘traditional’ is linked to its premise of assigning the highest epistemological value to ‘traditions’ (i.e. Hadith) in its Qur’ano-Sunnahic hermeneutic; and ‘neo’ refers to the fact that it is a contemporary phenomenon. An alternative term Neo-Ahl-Hadithism could also be used. The reason for the employment of the term Neo-Traditional Salafism rather than Neo-Ahl-Hadithism is that the literature written by scholars who subscribe to this approach of interpretation of the Sunnah (and the Qur’an) uses the term Salafism more frequently than the term *Ahl-Hadith*. Additionally, Salafism is a term that has a broader base in Islamic tradition and is more encompassing than *Ahl-Hadith*, which is more sectarian in nature.

Contemporary exponents of NTSm include Saudi Arabian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Yemeni, and Syrian Muslim scholars such as Al-Abatee, Bin Bazz, Al-Uthaymeen, Al-Atharee, Al-Madkhalee, and Ibn Muhammad Ad-Dehlawee Al-Madanee,¹⁶ some holding senior positions on *fatwa* councils. Their influence is felt among Muslims in the Middle East, North Africa, the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent,¹⁷ as well as major Muslim communities living in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom where ideological sympathizers have established their own publishing houses and websites.¹⁸ As the author has demonstrated elsewhere a number of scholars on western Muslims have detected the existence of NTSm and NTS-like western Muslim identity.¹⁹

1.1. **Describing NTS World-view and Identity**

In his most recent book, *Western Muslims and Future of Islam*, Tariq Ramadan presents a typology of six ‘major tendencies’ or ‘trends of thought’

¹⁶ For a more detailed list of NTS scholars and their backgrounds see the contents page in G. H. Haddad, *Albani and his Friends: A Concise Guide to the Salafi Movement* (Birmingham, UK, 2004). For an insightful explanation of the link between NTS scholars and other Muslim groups globally see O. Roy, 234-254.

¹⁷ See O. Roy, 234-243.

¹⁸ Publishing houses such as *T.R.O.I.D.* publications in Toronto; *Invitation to Islam* and *Al-Khilafat* Publications in London; *Salafi Publications* in Birmingham (http://www.salafipublications.com). Websites such as those of The Qur’an and Sunnah Society of Canada (http://www.qss.org); The Sunnah Islamic Page (http://al-sunnah.com). For a more exhaustive list see O. Roy, 241-242 (footnote 19).

concerning the interpretation of the Qurʾan and Sunnah by contemporary Muslims living in both predominantly non-Muslim and Muslim populated societies. Of these six typologies three include the term Salafism/ Salafi. This (re)-emergence and widespread dissemination of Salafi-like currents within contemporary Islamic thought is also argued by other contemporary scholars of Islamic tradition such as Jabiri, Hanafi, Abu Zayd, Tibi, El-Fadl, Arkoun, and many others. Thus, in order to understand how many contemporary Muslims are constructing and deriving their sense of religious identity, the concept of Salafism requires some further clarification and elaboration.

Salafism as a general approach to the interpretation of Islamic history, is embedded in the idea of the following in the footsteps of the al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ, the Righteous Predecessors. These usually include, besides the Prophet, his Companions and the two generations of pious Muslims that came after them. As an ideological premise Salafism has been a part of Islamic intellectual tradition since its earliest days as reflected in the works of Muslims in the first century of the Hijra.

As a concept, the genesis of the Salafi mind-set is perhaps best understood in the light of the political and theological schisms that took place in the Muslim community of the first century Hijra. At this time, the concept was used as an anchoring point for various ideologically compet-

---

21 The six 'trends of thought' include Salafi Literalism, Salafi Reformism, Political Salafi Literalism, Scholastic Traditionalism, Liberal/Rationalist Reformism and Sufism, ibid., 24-29.
22 M. Gaebel, Von der Kritik des arabischen Denkens zum panarabischen Aufbruch: Das philosophische und politischen Denken Muhammad Abid Gabris (Berlin, 1995).
24 H. N. Abu Zayd, Re-thinking the Qurʾan: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutic (Utrecht, 2004).
26 See El-Fadl (2003a).
ing groups to show that their views were consistent with those figures that were held in high esteem during the inception of the Muslim community, such as the first four caliphs, thus imbuing these factions with the sense of normativeness, credibility, legitimacy, and authoritativeness.\(^{30}\)

From an historical point of view, the earliest usage of the terms Salaf or Salafism is not associated with any particular ‘movement’ or religious party \textit{per se}. Rather it usually refers to the general attitude of the post-	extit{al-salaf al-\textit{salih}} generations’ mind-set on ‘ emulation-worthiness’ of the first century religious and political authorities who were perceived as having continuously remained faithful to the teachings of the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet\(^{31}\) (i.e. Sunnah)\(^{32}\) As such, Salafism can be described as a ‘project of reviving heritage projecting the ideologically sought future onto the present’, and the belief ‘in the possibility of materializing the past in the future’.\(^{33}\)

Furthermore, Salafism is to be viewed primarily as manifesting itself in the belief that the historical legacy of the Prophet’s embodiment of the Qur’an, as it was understood by the most eminent authorities belonging to the first three generations of Muslims, is normative, static, and universalistic in nature (in terms of methodology and its byproduct, the creed); hence, it is to be literally adhered to and imitated in a ‘contextual vacuum’ across all space and time by the subsequent generations of Muslims, primarily by being faithful to a literal and decontextualized Qur’ano-Sunnahic

\(^{30}\) For an example of Hasan al-Basri(d. 110 A.H.)’s use of the word Salaf in his treaties to support the doctrine of free will, see Z. I. Ansari, ‘Islamic Juristic Terminology before Shafi’i: A Semantical Analysis with Special Reference to Kufa’, \textit{Arabica} (1972), 264.

\(^{31}\) That is in contrast to other religious and/or political authorities who were considered to have deviated from the ‘right Qur’ano-Sunnahic teachings’. As Ahmad Mousalli has convincingly argued, the development of the ‘true or correct doctrine’ was most significantly influenced by ideological developments brought about by opposition movements or reformist attitudes, especially during the formative period of Islamic thought. See A. Mousalli, \textit{The Islamic Quest for Democracy, Pluralism and Human Rights} (Gainesville, US, 2001). Hereinafter A. Mousalli.

\(^{32}\) Hasan Al-Basri’s remark that free will as a concept belongs to the Qur’anic and Sunnahic teachings as exemplified by the Salaf, quoted in ibid. The fact that Salafism is essentially a negation of other ‘heretical’ interpretations/approaches to the Qur’an and Sunnah is evident in the structure of the content of Salafi books, which frequently include the words ‘the refutation of’ such as N. Al-Abanee, \textit{The Principals of Salafi Methodology} (Toronto, 2003).

\(^{33}\) Y. Wahyudi, 211.
hermeneutic whose anchoring epistemologico-methodological tool is the canonical Hadith-based literature.

The origins of what we refer to as the Neo-Salafi creed and movement go back to the late nineteenth century. The creed’s major proponents were authorities such as Al-Shawkani (d.1834), Al-San’ani (d. 1810), ‘Abdulh (d.1905), Al-Afghani (d.1897), and Rida (d. 1935).34 Remaining faithful to the Salafi mind-set these Neo-Salafi reformers re-claimed the ‘epistemological promise’ of the earlier Salafi-oriented ideologies of being able to retrieve the lost teachings of the Qur’an and Sunnah, as exemplified by the Prophet and his rightly guided Companions, by means of revivification of the true Qur’anic and Sunnah teachings (ibya’ al-Qur’an wa al-Sunnah). The primary motivation behind this undertaking was the desire to free the Muslim countries from shackles of colonization and prevalent practices deemed un-Islamic. Its intellectual and methodological basis was characterized by the insistence of the return to the pure, original textual sources of the Qur’an and Sunnah of the Prophet. Neo-Salafism, furthermore, was built on a romanticized and utopian view of the past, ‘ignoring or demonizing the balance of Islamic history’.35 It largely rejected the a priori adherence to the long-established juristic heritage and legal hermeneutic of traditional schools of thought (Madhhab) by engaging in the practice of talifq or cross-Madhhab legal hermeneutic, thus ‘deconstructing traditional notions of established authority within Islam’.36

This one-dimensional, reductionist view of Islamic historical heritage inherent in its Salafi interpretation is particularly appealing to Muslim masses ‘because it connotes authenticity and legitimacy [and] as a term, it is exploitable by any movement that wants to claim that it is grounded in Islamic authenticity’.37 That the belief in return to ‘pure’ Qur’ano-Sunnah teachings is, however, intellectually and scholarly inaccurate is borne out of the fact that:

This [Salafi] approach, besides being historical, proved to be hopelessly simplistic and naïve [as]—it was impossible to return to Qur’an and Sunnah in a vacuum [because] return to the Qur’an necessarily meant a return to classical sources that commented on

35 K. El-Fadl (2003a) 174-175.
the context and meaning of the verses and that explained the collection and documentation of the Qur'anic text. Furthermore, a return to Sunnah necessarily meant a return to the classical sources that compiled, authenticated, conceptualized, and interpreted traditions of the Prophet and his Companions.

Neo-Salafism, however, neither isolated itself from nor was reluctant to engage with modernity; furthermore, it was not inherently anti-Western. It attempted to reconcile the realities of modernity and the era of post-colonial emerging Arab nationalism with the Islamic tradition itself by ‘reading the values of modernism into the original sources of Islam’. In the words of Tibi, who uses the term Islamic Modernism as the equivalent of Neo-Salafism, this approach ‘attempted to espouse cultural and institutional modernity by seeking a synthesis between these concepts and Islam, but doing so without rethinking the traditional Islamic theocentric world-view’.

Methodologically, Neo-Salafism is the twin brother of another strong current in the more recent history of Islam, namely that of the much deliberated Wahhabism, which spread in the Muslim world under the banner of Neo-Salafism. Wahhabi thought, originating in the deserts of Saudi Arabia in the middle of the eighteenth century and spreading with the help of Saudi petrodollars in the 1970s, is based on the ‘most patriarchal and exclusionary orientations within contemporary Islam’.

Wahhabism’s anti-rationalism, anti-intellectualism, anti-mysticism, and strict literalism is hostile to humanistic epistemology, and attempts to interpret the Divine law without any degree of contextualization, thereby proclaiming ‘the diacritical and indeterminate hermeneutic of classical jurisprudential hermeneutic as corruptions of purity of Islamic faith and law’. Wahhabism’s oppositional dialectic and hostility extends not only to the ‘Western Other’ but also to un-likeminded Muslims. In its

---

38 K. El-Fadl (2003a), 174-175.
40 A. Mousalli, 15-16.
43 K. El-Fadl (2003b), 49.
44 Ibid., 50.
self-contained system of belief ‘it has no reason to engage or interact with the other except from the point of dominance’.\textsuperscript{45} Other characteristics of Wahhabi thought include a complete disregard for universalistic moral values and appreciation for ethics in the realms of Islamic theology and law.\textsuperscript{46} Its epistemology is entirely pre-modern and considers modern knowledge disciplines in the realms of social sciences, arts, and humanities as foreign and alien to Muslim tradition, rejecting their validity and legitimate usage in the religious sciences such as in the interpretation of Qur’an and Sunnah.

Wahhabi attitudes towards interpretation of Qur’an and Sunnah follow closely in the footsteps of the pre-modern \textit{Ahl-Hadith} movement, members of whom ‘are conservative in outlook, generally try to superimpose the face value of Scripture (Qur’an and Sunnah) on civilization… [they are] puritan, idealist, and fundamentalist in their effort to adapt reality to the Scripture’.\textsuperscript{47} The usage of the slogan of ‘going back to Qur’an and Sunnah’ by Wahhabi-oriented Islamic groups such as NTS, ‘instead of interacting with the present, takes refuge in the golden age of Islam by making and hence isolating a certain period of Islamic history as its [only] foundation’.\textsuperscript{48}

The complex dynamics and interaction between social, political, and economic factors over the last two to three decades resulted in the merging of Wahhabism and Neo-Salafism and the formulation of a new hybrid model that El-Fadl refers to as ‘Salafabism’, which inherited both the Salafi and Wahhabi world-views and mindsets.\textsuperscript{49} The Salabafist, or what we refer to as NTS, world-view, by extension, considers itself an inheritor and a continuation of the traditional approach to viewing the past of the salaf.

Although militant groups with a political agenda\textsuperscript{50} operating in both predominantly Muslim and non-Muslim societies such as Al-Qa’eda, the Taliban, \textit{Al-Hizb al-Tahrir}, \textit{Jamā‘ah Islāmiyyah}, \textit{Al-Muwahidūn}, and \textit{Al-Muhājirūn}, together with Bin Laden and Al-Zawhari and other like-minded Muslims, do not have a large following among Muslims, they are ‘in fact extreme manifestations of [the] more prevalent intellectual current

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} ibid., 52
\textsuperscript{47} Y. Wahyudi, 1.
\textsuperscript{48} Y. Wahyudi, 210.
\textsuperscript{49} For a more detailed explanation of this dynamic see K. El-Fadl (2003b) 52-62; see also K. El-Fadl (2003a), 173-175.
\textsuperscript{50} O. Roy refers to them as Neo-Fundamentalists.
in modern Islam\textsuperscript{51} which the current author refers to as NTSm. NTSm’s approach to Qur’ano-Sunnahic teachings and Islamic Weltanschauung, as such, can be seen as providing an ideological foundation on whose basis its abovementioned more politically radical offshoots operate.

NTSm’s theological (\textit{lahutiniyyah}) world-view considers revelation to be the ‘first source of human knowledge and the indisputable complete final source in which human beings are torn between two extremes, command and prohibition’.\textsuperscript{52} This attitude towards tradition (\textit{Turath}) is solely concerned with the ‘imitation of the original, the preservation of the original requirements and prohibition of going against the original’.\textsuperscript{53}

Another quintessential element of NTS thought is its attitude towards the past and present—and the future. Mansoor asserts that according to the NTS world-view, tradition is exclusively seen as providing a sense of direction one should not deviate from. The past is seen to provide all the answers and constantly imposes itself upon the present. In the words of Al-Azmeh,

\begin{quote}
history consists of continuity over a time which knows no substantive causalities, for causality is only manifest in discontinuity... [and] continuity is constantly \textit{in} antithetical relation to all otherness.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

According to this view, textual sources precede and should not be understood through reality; rather, reality should be understood through the text, thereby ignoring whatever reality shaped the process of text formation. NTSm only accepts the technological accomplishments of modern civilization—the West—but refuses its intellectual premises.\textsuperscript{55}

An essential element of NTS identity construction is therefore premised upon a particular concept of time. According to this understanding:

\begin{quote}
[P]rophetic time is privileged over human time, for prophetic time keeps him [the believer] close to the origin, where there is no innovation of creativity, only imitation
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} K. El Fadl (2003b), 61.
\textsuperscript{53} I. Mansoor, 169.
\textsuperscript{54} A. Al-Azmeh, 47-48.
\textsuperscript{55} I. Donohue, ‘Final Declaration’, in I. Mansoor, 175.
and repetitiveness... where the notion of identity operates within imitation and repetitiveness, where essence supercedes existence, specificity precedes universality, and the distinctive supercedes connective.56

In other words the authenticity of one’s identity can only be established by returning to a fixed point in historical time, that of the Prophet and the early Muslim community.

The concept of ‘authenticity’, a term of paramount importance in this world-view, is in turn conceptualized in terms of contingent linking of both past and future by the ontological void of today.57 Authenticity, therefore, serves the sole purpose of ‘designating the self in contradistinction to the other’.58

This component of the contemporary Islamic resurgence among Muslims is exhibited by engaging in what Noor terms the ‘rhetoric of oppositional dialectics’, in which the question of Islamic identity is primarily approached on the basis ‘of the trope of the negative Other which manifests itself in a number of forms: secularism, the West, international Jewry/Zionism, capitalism etc’.59 Its world-view is binary in nature, considering the Islamic civilization as largely—if not completely—antithetical to that of the West, allowing for no civilizational cross-pollination and syncretism. This view is justified by employing the medieval epistemology found in Muslim jurisprudential works of that time such as Dar al-Islām, Dar al-Kufr and Dar al-Harb.

Epistemologically it considers modernity and its byproducts, such as rationality and the development of human and social sciences as Bid’ah, an ungodly innovation, irreconcilable and alien to pure Islamic thought. Furthermore, NTSM’s political ideology, based upon the imitation of the early models of the Islamic caliphate,60 is hostile towards any modern theories that do not have an epistemetic root in a pre-modern Islamic tradition, considering feminism, democracy, and human rights issues as entirely alien to Islam and Bid’ah from the West polluting the minds of Muslims.61

56 I. Mansoor, 183.
57 A. Al-Azmeh, 48.
58 Ibid.
59 F. A. Noor, ‘What is the Victory of Islam? Towards a Different Understanding of the Ummah and Political Success in the Contemporary World’, in O. Safi (2003), 322.
60 See I. Mansoor, 175-178.
61 Ibid., 58.
2. Origins and World-view of Progressive Muslims: A Brief Overview

In this article the term Progressive Muslims (PMs) is used in the same manner as the homonymous term developed by the contributors of the book Progressive Muslims (edited by Omid Safi).63

The book Progressive Muslims was:

[the] result of almost an entire year of conversation, dialogue, and debate among the fifteen contributors. It had its real genesis in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 in what we [the contributors] saw as the urgent need to raise the level of conversation, and to get away from the standard apologetic presentations of Islam.64

The PM movement is characterized by the commitment of its adherents to

striv[ing] to realize a just and pluralistic society through critically engaging Islam, a relentless pursuit of social justice, an emphasis on gender equality as a foundation of

---

62 A more in depth discussion on the origins and the worldview of progressive Muslims thought can be found in A. Duderija, ‘Religious Identity Construction in Australian-born Muslims Residing in Perth: The Case of Neo-Traditional Salafis and Progressive Muslims’.

63 The Progressive Muslim movement as described and defined in this study is distinct from that of the Progressive Muslim Union (PMU) of North America and its statement of principals found at (http://www.pmuna.org/archives/our_mission/index.php). Although originally the chairman of the PMU of North America (PMUNA), Safi resigned from its board in 2005. The reasons behind the split between the contributors of the Progressive Muslims book and the PMUNA are alluded to in Safi’s article cited in footnote three. Safi asserts that some elements within the progressive Muslim movement: ‘have become every bit as rigid, authoritarian, and yes, dogmatic as the conservative movements they/we so readily criticize; that there is the existence of a variety of secular tendencies in the progressive movement based on the Marxist interpretation of secularism with its hostility towards Islam as a source of inspiration’, and ‘an unfortunate and unnecessary hostility among some of us [Progressive Muslims] to take seriously the spiritual and intellectual heritage of Islam, and draw on the vast resources it offers us for living as meaningful deputys’; he also states that ‘some of the organizations that have adopted the name “progressive Muslims” today are dangerously close (if not already there) of falling into the trap of providing the “Islamic veneer” for many positions without seriously taking the challenge of engaging the traditions of Islam’; that ‘many of us progressives have lost the moral basis of interpersonal relations’; and, finally, that ‘many progressives are being consistently antagonistic to the mainstream Muslim community rather then providing an alternative to the mainstream Muslim community in accordance with the points above’.

64 O. Safi, 18.
human rights, a vision of religious and ethnic pluralism, and a methodology of non-violent resistance.65

Furthermore, Safi asserts that the PM movement is a reform-based movement that is:

marked by a genuine spiritual core, something that would combine and yet go beyond the earlier rationalistic [twentieth] century movements with Sufi etiquette and post-modern, post-colonial liberation stances.66

At the core of this PM movement is a very strong emphasis on spirituality and interpersonal relationships based on the teachings of some of the ‘romantic or idealistic Sufi ethics of dealing with fellow human beings in a way that always recall[s] and remember[s] the reflection of Divine Presence and qualities in one another’.67

The proponents of Progressive Muslim Thought (PMT) are to be found spread throughout the Muslim68 and non-Muslim world. Many of the leading PM intellectuals live in the West and teach at Western universities. Some of them obtained their graduate and post-graduate qualifications from these institutions and, in some cases, have also received traditional training in the Islamic sciences.69 In the words of Safi:

unlike their liberal Muslim forefathers, progressive Muslims represent a broad coalition of female and male Muslim activists and intellectuals. One of the distinguishing features of the progressive Muslim movement as the vanguard of Islamic (post-)modernism has been the high level of female participation as well as the move to highlight women’s rights as part of a broader engagement with human rights.70

Importantly, progressive Islam is not, as Moosa rightfully warns, “a ready-made ideology or an off-the-shelf creed, movement or pack of doctrines”. It

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 For example, Hasan Hanafi in Egypt; Abdal Karim Soroush in Iran, Muhammad Hashim Kamali in Malaysia, the late Nurkoliich Majid in Indonesia, Ali Ashgar Engineer in India, Enes Kacic in Bosnia, and Abdul Qadir Tayoub in South Africa, among others.
69 See previous footnote, as well as the list of the contributors to O. Safi (2003).
70 O. Safi (2005).
is not a school of thought as it is more than a systematic theory of interpretation of the entire Muslim law, theology, ethics, and politics. It is at best a practice, a package of loyalties and commitments, a work in progress. The concept of “progress” is not conceptualised in its Hegelian-Fukuyamian teleological view of history/time in a sense of inevitability of change, but “progress” is rather framed in the realm of the “possibility” of change. In the words of Moosa progress is “fortuitous, rather than inevitable, hold[ing] the promise that change might occur in diverse and multiple forms”. Thus, the word “progress” is not premised on the “totalitarian narrative of progress driven by scientism, [and] liberal capitalism” or that of its “deterministic or apocalyptic theory of progress” embedded in the larger framework of singular modernity.

The concept of PMT is, therefore, a heuristic device which helps delineate and describe a particular way of ‘being a Muslim’.

In simplest terms the term PMs, a somewhat problematic term in itself as openly admitted by its original users, is an ‘umbrella term that signifies an invitation to those who want an open and safe space to undertake a rigorous, honest, potentially difficult engagement with the tradition’. In its nature it is unapologetic, anti-neo conservative, and anti-simplistic. Indeed, one of the aims of this intellectual movement is to bring forth the sheer breadth, wealth, and richness of Muslim thought and to self-position itself in it.

PMT does not claim a complete epistemological break with the Muslim interpretative harvest of the Muslim tradition of the past. PM world-view, however, does reject the view of the regressive character of history/time and the static nature of the Islamic tradition espoused by NTS. PMs’ understanding of tradition is based on the fundamental premise that primary textual sources of the Islamic world-view (the Qur’an and Hadith-derived Sunnah) are subject to humanly constructed interpretational processes and

---


72 E. Moosa, ‘Transitions in the “Progress” of Civilisation’, 118-120.


74 O. Safi (2003), 16-17.

75 K. Ali defines neo-conservatism as ‘those who support the continued enforcement of law as developed by jurists throughout the classical period (period between the end of formative era and the advent of modernity) and, in its transformed form by legislatures in Muslim nations’. K. Ali, ‘Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence’ in O. Safi (2003), 172-175.
that a distinction between ‘religion and religious knowledge’,76 ‘normative and historical Islam’—to use Rahman’s terminology,77 or, in the parlance of Islamic jurisprudence, between Shariah (divine worldview) and fiqh (its human understanding), ought to be made. This also applies to Islamic Law and Theology. This interpretational awareness of PMT translates itself in the importance and emphasis given to examining the epistemological and methodological dimensions underlying and determining the validity and soundness of various inherited interpretational models of overall Qur’ano-Sunnahic teachings. As such, this is the reason for using the phrase Progressive Muslim Thought and not Progressive Islamic Thought. PMT calls, therefore, for a ‘careful analysis of some of the more complex and foundational presumptions in Muslim legal and ethical philosophy’ and the necessary epistemological and paradigm shifts in the post-Empire Islam climate.78

The PM approach to tradition, furthermore, is that of serious engagement with the full spectrum of Islamic thought and practices,79 an ‘engagement with the multiple intellectual and spiritual traditions of Islam’.80 ‘The PM understanding of the concept of Islam in general is not viewed within a framework of a reified religion, culture or particular way of life but as, to borrow Karamustafa’s phrase, a ‘civilisational project in progress’, that is

[d]ynamic and beyond reification; a truly global phenomenon adoptable across cultural, national and ethnic divides; both a supracultural construct that is inclusive of and interactive with culture (i.e. inclusively interactive); a treasure trove of civilisational riches serving all humanity; and constantly in progress but having a core set of beliefs and practices that are ultimately linked to the historical legacy of Prophet Muhammad.81

Thus, according to Moosa, progressive Muslims’ worldview is based on more than “identity, texts, practices and history” but includes an additional, undefined element that “involves all those things that make one feel that you belong.”82

---

79 O. Safi (2003), 7.
The notion of *jihad* in PMT is closely linked to that of its etymologically related concept of *ijtihad*. Indeed, an essential component of PMT, according to Safi, is the ‘struggle (*jihad*) to exorcise [our] inner demons and bring justice in the world at large by engaging in a progressive and critical interpretation of Islam (*ijtihad*). As such, PMs are opposed to the invocation of Islam in militant and political rhetorical terms.

Furthermore, PMs are engaged in what Safi refers to as a ‘multiple critique’. One aspect of this critique is the engagement with tradition in light of modernity, ‘a critique which derives its inspiration from the heart of Islamic tradition’. This attitude to the accumulated intellectual heritage is not framed in the context of the Islamic equivalent of Lutheran Christian reformation, argues Safi; rather, it is a ‘fine tuning, a polishing, a grooming, an editing and re-emphasising’ of certain aspects of the Islamic historical legacy of Muslim thought. Indeed, for PMs, the Qur'an continues to assume a central position in contemporary Muslim debates and is considered the ultimate legitimizing text of the Islamic tradition.

One of PMs’ main characteristics is engagement with tradition in light of modernity, the embracing of the modern episteme, including the realms of social sciences, arts and humanities. It is ‘a critique which derives its inspiration from the heart of Islamic tradition’ and is not a ‘graft of (Western) Secular Humanism onto the tree of Islam’, but ‘a graft that, although receiving inspiration from other spiritual and political movements, must ultimately grow in the soil of Islam’.

This does not mean that PM identity is identical to, uncritical of and completely subsumed by a dominant ‘Western one’, but rather that there are several spheres of congruence and overlapping between the two as noted above.

PMS’ approach to modernity is characterized by an attempt to ‘problematize the history of debate between Islam and modernity or Islam and

---

83 Commonly translated as struggle/effort/exertion, both spiritual and physical.

84 Usually linked to intellectual exertion when engaging in interpretation of normative sources of the Islamic tradition.

85 O. Safi (2003), 8.

86 Ibid., 2.

87 Ibid.

88 For the tradition-modernity dynamic from a PM identity point of view see E. Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill, US, 2005) 58-61.

89 O. Safi (2003), 2, 8, 16.

90 There is, of course, no monolithic western identity.
the West’, by ‘internalization of modern ideas and concepts in contemporary Muslim discourses’, and by ‘exemplifying fragmentation and diffusion of intellectual authority in contemporary Muslim societies and reflecting the multiplicity of its sources’.91

PMs consider modernity and its byproducts a result of transcultural and transpolitical intercivilizational processes, thus demonopolizing the claim that modernity is a pure, universal, and monopolar Western civilizational product. Their understanding of modernity is based upon a cultural theory of modernity according to which modernity unfolds within specific cultural (or civilizational) contexts, having different starting points and leading to multiple modernities.92

Progressive Muslims consider themselves to be “critical traditionalists”, that is, PM “constantly interrogate tradition and strive to ask productive questions.”93 Unlike the Salafi embedded NTS and madhhab-based approaches, the nature of the concept of tradition (Turāth) in PM thought is not seen as static and “pre-fabricated design of being”, to use Moosa’s phrase94 but as dynamic, “manifesting itself in the relationship between the past which produced the Turāth and the present in which the Turāth still lives.”95 Based upon a dialectical relationship between the past and the present, PMT ‘studies Turāth in the light of the present, its problems, its questions and its needs’.96 The question of authenticity and heritage is constructed along the lines of what was outlined in the Fourth Statement of the Final Declaration by Arab Muslim intellectuals who convened in Kuwait in 1974. The statement asserts:

Authenticity does not consist in literal clinging to the heritage but rather in setting out from it to what follows and from its values to a new phase in which there is enrichment for it and development of its values. Real revivification of the heritage is possible only through a creative, historical, critical comprehension of it; through transcending it in a new process of creation; through letting the past remain past so that it may not

92 See, for example, A. Mousalli.
95 cf. Gaebels, Das philosophische und politischen Denken Muhammad Abid Gabiris, Part One, pp. 5-45.
96 I. Mansoor, 59.
PMs are not, therefore, the first generation of Muslims who have grappled with the issues of Islamic tradition and modernity. When talking about the phenomenon of Neo-Salafism we have referred to the attempts of Neo-Salafi reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to come to terms with the advent of modernity and the modern episteme. These early reformers made the first steps in 'advancing a synthesis between Islamic and modern Western values with the impulse stemming from within the Islamic tradition and culture itself as the integrating framework for modernity'.

Progressive Islam both continues and radically departs from this 150-year-old tradition of Liberal Islam. Unlike some earlier modernists, PMs are almost uniformly critical of colonialism, both in its nineteenth century manifestation and its current variety. PMs develop a critical and non-apologetic 'multiple critique' with respect to both Islam and modernity.

Moosa argues, however, that modernity's most precious gift of rationality to the Muslim modernist of the nineteenth and twentieth century did not result in an embrace of the modern episteme in the realms of humanities and social sciences. Therefore, he maintains, the Islamic intellectual legacy at the hands of these scholars was not subject to a critical insight of modern epistemology, something that PMT does subject itself to.

PMT proponents do not advocate assimilation into Western modernity's world-view. Their attitude towards modernity is characterized by an awareness that the modernity they are facing now is unlike what their Muslim forerunners experienced. Additionally PMs are more familiar with the complexities of modernity and do not consider 'culturo-intellectual assimilation of Western modernity as the basis for reform'.

PMs subscribe to the view that the socio-political and cultural processes which have brought about epistemological and ontological changes in the

---

98 S. Taji-Farouki, 8.
100 O. Safi (2005).
102 S. Taji-Farouki, 9.
103 Ibid.
Western world-view, and resulted in the advent of modernity, are considered a result of a dynamic process of civilizational interaction and mutual construction through transcultural, transpolitical and trans-social spaces. Additionally, PMs believe that this modern episteme could also be applied within the framework of the socio-cultural context of societies where Muslims are the majority, resulting in the genesis of another distinct type of modernity.

Furthermore, PMT, unlike the overwhelmingly de-contextualized hermeneutics of interpretational models employed by previous interpretational communities, is characterized by a realization of the necessity to contextualize the primary sources of Shariah (Qur'an and Sunnah), with the benefit of the hindsight of the fruits of labour of those who have engaged in the same processes in the past. To aid these processes recourse is taken to traditional disciplines as well as: anthropology, sociology, politics and political economy, psychology, and reading/textual hermeneutics, among others.

Besides awarding a vital role to the concept of socio-cultural embeddedness of the Qur'an and Sunnah, ethico-moral considerations are the highest hermeneutical tool in PMs’ approach to their interpretation. As such, PMT is a ‘search for moral and humane aspects of Islamic intellectual heritage and [force] against moral lethargy’. One of its guiding principles is ‘to reclaim beautiful in the vast and rich moral tradition of Islam and to discover its moral imperatives’. Therefore, PMs challenge those who promote narrow Qur’anic interpretations and a rigid, fanatical, and exclusionist vision of Islam.

3. Representation and Role of the Women in PMT and NTSm

Representations of Muslim women ‘are central to political debates on cultural identity, [the] relationship between Muslim societies and the West, tradition and authenticity, and cultural specificity and globalism’. Furthermore, women in Islamic discourses play a vital role in the (re)-construction

---

104 For a detailed discussion on PMs’ methodology of interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah, see the work cited in footnote 14.
106 Ibid.
of Muslim religio-cultural identity. Views on women, therefore, play a major part in constructing of Islamic groups' world-views and identities.

Based upon their diametrically opposed interpretational models of Qur’ano-Sunnahic teachings PMT and NTSm envisage very different views of the representation and function of women in Islamicate and non-Islamc cultures. Due to space constraints only a brief juxtaposition of these views is possible for the purposes of this article.

By developing the theory of active female sexuality and considering the female body as inherently morally and socially corrupting, the classical and NTS schools of thought impose a number of socio-spatial regulatory rules and regulations on women, including the religious obligation of hijab or niqab seclusion of women, and the segregation of sexes.

Based on a particular model of interpretation of Qur’ano-Sunnahic teachings, participation of women in the public sphere, even for the purposes of attending the mosque, is considered resentful, provocative, and offensive to the public domain, which belongs solely to males. The normative, authentic Muslim female identity is constructed in reference to that of a veiled, secluded woman who remains within the private space of her home and does not venture or mix into the public space of the male ummah (Muslim community). Another aspect of this ideal Muslim female is that of an obedient wife whose religious duty is to please and satisfy the needs of her husband.

The PM view maintains, on the other hand, that the question of perceptions of the nature of the female gender, including that of sexuality, are socio-culturally contingent and tainted. Thus, they reject the classical and NTS view of the inherently active female sexuality and the concept of the female body being innately morally corrupting. Qur’ano-Sunnahic evidence used to give these practices an ‘Islamic’ foundation is considered as essentially a remnant of the patriarchal nature of the interpretative

---


109 Described in detail in works cited in footnotes 3 and 96.


111 Covering the hair without covering the face.

112 Covering of the hair and most of the face (apart from the eyes).

113 See footnote 103.
communities in the past, echoing the view of Bellamy that the ‘sexual ethics in Islam’ were ‘worked out by men’.

As far as segregation and attitude to public space is concerned, PMs point to the fact that during the early Muslim community in Medina, when the Prophet was still alive, as testified by a large number of traditions and on the basis of historical evidence of the Prophet’s sirah (life), women led a very active social life. They would frequently attend the mosque, which was a widespread practice. Often men would pray behind women, and men’s prayers would be considered valid. Women and men were not separated by a physical barrier in the mosque and, furthermore, some early Muslim jurists maintained that a physical barrier between men and women during the prayer would invalidate women’s prayers.

Additionally, the institution of gender segregation is considered a later, introduced practice and, although having been advocated by some of the Companions of the Prophet (especially the second caliph ‘Umar), essentially entrenching itself only at the time of the Abbasids.

The practices of seclusion of women, veiling, and gender segregation are not considered normative parts of Muslim female religious identity. Women are seen as autonomous, human beings inherently equal to men whose religious identity is based upon their level of taqwa (consciousness of God) and does not hinge upon their blind obedience or satisfaction of their husbands’ demands.

The implications of the two approaches above vis-à-vis one another are self-evident. PMs’ understanding of the Qur’ano-Sunnahic teachings provides a religiously and traditionally authentic approach towards the nature of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in either the contexts of Islamicate or non-Islamicate societies, based upon the principles of inclusivism and a non-antagonistic approach to the (religious) Other at both individual and civilizational levels.

117 F. Mernissi, The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam, chapters eight and ten.
The NTS approach, on the other hand, is based upon a methodology of interpretation of Qur’ano-Sunnahic teachings which fosters a type of religious identity and world-view that is oppositional to, reactionary with, and even conflictual towards the (religious) Other. It is an ideology, to quote Tibi, ‘for inciting conflict, not a strategy for fostering peace between local cultures and regional civilizations’.  

As Majid perceptively argues, given the current global socio-political and economic climate it is of paramount importance that the contemporary generations of Muslims adopt a PM worldview for their own survival. This is a task whose achievement can be worked at by both Muslims and non-Muslims for the purposes of creating conditions in which they can coexist in peace, harmony, and mutual respect, regardless of the place and time—a relationship based upon the Qur’anic principle of competing in goodness.

---