

Issues/Discussion Forum

Contemplating Islamic Reform

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The concomitant usage of the two terms- Islam and Reform constitutes a major trope in the discourse on Islam today. Everyone, from Irshad Manji to Tariq Ramadan, is a self styled reformer, seeking to reform Islam. It is really not clear what anyone really means by Islamic reform anymore. The term often says more about the political postures of those who use it than Islam or reform. Therefore any conversation that seeks to address this issue must begin by defining, and specially so, proscribing the content and scope of the term so that it may once again regain its salience.

Revival and Reform are Islamic Traditions

The ideas of *tajdid* (renewal) and *Islah* (reform) are neither new nor unusual to Islamic thought . The advent of Islam – the message and mission of Prophet Muhammed himself can be seen as a divine endeavor to revive Abrahamic monotheism and reform the then extant society and culture from jahiliyyah to Islam. This philosophy of reform and renewal is a recurrent theme in Islamic intellectual and political history. Al-Ghazzali, Ibn Taymiyyah, Abdul Wahhab, Shah Waliullah, Muhammed Abdu, Maulana Maududi, and now Abdullah Al-Naim, and Tariq Ramadan have all sought to revive and reform.

As far as Muslim intellectuals who cared about the condition of Muslim reality were concerned, they sought to revive Islam in order to reform Muslim society. But today we live in an age, when Muslims and non-Muslims are talking about reforming Islam to revive Muslim societies. While the new, reversed juxtapositioning of revival and reform, is gaining dominance the old theme of revival continues to echo in the collective Muslim consciousness. If one were permitted to use a broad brush, one could argue that those who are described as Islamists are still talking about revival, and those who are described as Islamic modernists, are pushing for Islamic reform.

Then there is the West, and its incessant demands on Muslims to change, and Islam to reform. Except for a few voices that are politically neutral that call for reform, most of

Western demands are political even if the substance of their critique of Islam and Muslim realities is meaningful. Western demands range from the ridiculous (mosques without minarets) to profound (reforming Muslim conceptions of shariah to become in tune with the age of nation states and positivist legal regimes normatively concerned with human rights, equity and equality). Concerned Muslim intellectuals must engage with this critique to understand it, but not use it as the primary motivation to reconstitute our understanding of Islam or reformulate Muslim institutions. Western criticism must be treated as informative but not instructive of Muslim initiatives for reform.

Reform and Revival is Necessary

The only reason why Muslims need to contemplate reform is if there is a normative dissatisfaction with Muslim reality. The purpose of reform therefore will be to restore justice, virtue, and compassion to Muslim conditions. The normative ill health could be a consequence of unhealthy institutional practices (institutions like state, judiciary, university, civil society), thereby necessitating societal reform, or because of an intellectual decline. Intellectual decline that Muslim societies can face is either a decline in its ability to understand and translate the Islamic message from its sources into meaningful and salutary practice, or a decline in the processes of epistemology — knowledge retention, production and dissemination. This would necessitate a reform in the existing dysfunctional epistemological regimes and revival and rejuvenation of the spirit of *Ijtihad*.

In the light of contemporary Muslim realities, without delving too much into empirical discussion, I submit that neither the normative realities of the Muslim world are healthy nor is the intellectual condition of the Ummah comforting. We live in an age of sickness. The Muslim World is unhealthy in body, spirit and mind. We need to revive and reform left, right and center.

What Can We Do?

What I mean by reform is simple. I am calling for a critical re-visitation of Islamic sources and Islamic intellectual heritage. I am also calling for a renewed appreciation of the tremendous intellectual diversity in Islamic thought and a recognition that the development and dissemination of Islamic thought has suffered a truncated history as a consequence of global political developments, the most prominent of which have been the decline of Muslim society and the impact of colonial domination.

To actually talk of Islamic reform or revival in a global sense is a bit far fetched in this age and time when diversities of culture, nationality and intellectual predilections are so vast. There are over a billion and a half Muslims in literally millions of communities all over and there is no single politburo of Islam, like the Vatican is for the Catholics, where doctrinal reforms can be made, legitimized, codified and even enforced. The difficulty that the Pope is having with his agenda of tolerance is indicative of the difficulty even when such a centralized authority does exist.

What then can we do? We need to adopt split strategic. As Muslim we develop a global consciousness that revival and reform are necessary. Many Islamic movements have already impressed upon the fact that revival is necessary but only modernist Muslims like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Abduh have called for reforms. The acceptance that reform is necessary will create the space for Muslim thinkers to think critically and reevaluate our heritage. There will be more opportunities for scholars to think and write freely. At the moment many Muslim scholars are afraid literally for their lives. The case of Javed Ghamidi of Pakistan is an illustrative example. He had to flee Pakistan in order to continue his work.

But actual reforms can and must take place locally. Local communities must do what is best for their spiritually and socio-political well being and act accordingly. We already see such reforms all across the Muslim world. We need more serious, more rapid and more systemic reforms than the episodic and occasionally ones we are currently experiencing.

(Courtesy: Ijtihad.org)
