

Introduction

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There is an irony in the pronounced attention on Islam and Islamic doctrine over the question of 'reform' voiced in recent years. On the one hand, Islamic doctrine, as it is practised in many parts of the Muslim world, contains tenets that appear unresponsive to changes in global normative developments, particularly in relation to freedom of religion, gender rights and political pluralism. On the other hand, Islam as a belief system possesses highly effective tools for reform and adaptation. These tools take on greater significance with the absence of a rigid clerical structure, which has often mitigated reform in Islam's fellow Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity. With this in mind, this volume aims to unpack what those within and outside Muslim communities mean by 'reform'.

The assertion of conservative perspectives during the mid-twentieth century or the development of militant and radical ideologies based in the Islamic idiom after the 1960s and 1970s may themselves be seen as 'reforms' in the way Islam relates to the political and social domain. The challenging political situation in the Muslim Middle East generated numerous responses and Islam was reinvigorated and reorientated as part of this process. The emergent 'political Islam' altered the ways in which Islam was instrumentalised in the individual and communal lives of many in the Muslim world. However, this volume seeks to approach the issue of reform from a different angle.

Specifically, it highlights how both elites and non-elites have sought to innovate in how they deal with Islam's relationship to politics, society and law. Here, this volume has deliberately chosen to emphasise the 'critical voices' when examining Islam and the question of reform to highlight the evolving and dynamic discourse that surrounds the question of Islamic reform.

The thematic direction of this volume was largely organic, stemming from a workshop hosted by Monash University in November 2006. This workshop was designed for early career researchers, bringing together scholars in examination of political and social issues in Muslim communities and enabling exploration of the key themes that had initially drawn us to the study of Muslim communities. As a meeting of early career researchers it is perhaps unsurprising that we were drawn to emergent and critical voices that articulated social, political and theological challenges. The theme that links the Muslim thinkers under investigation here is that of change. The individuals and movements considered here, while active in markedly different socio-political climates, all demonstrate the fundamental ethos of reform, a willingness to draw on their own intellectual and cultural heritage while engaging with broader dialogues in the pursuit of revitalising Islam's political and social functionality.

Reform, by definition, is not a complete break with tradition. Therefore a central element in this dynamic is the determination by scholars, activists, politicians and critical thinkers to re-claim the tenets of their faith. Muslim communities have historically displayed a tendency towards a continuation of the status quo. The individuals and movements under consideration here share the determination, often at great personal risk, to push aside existing political and social elites and the historically accepted interpretations of Islam and its place in society. The perspectives examined in this volume avoid superficial or apologetic examinations of Islam's political and social role. Instead, they meticulously scrutinise the religion's public role, often questioning the validity of tenets that have acted as normative tools of empowerment for existing elites for centuries.

A consistent theme that emerges from the papers in this volume is the effort to meaningfully and critically engage with Islam's sacred texts. This engagement has led many thinkers to reinterpret Islam in relation to the changing historical circumstances. This is highlighted by Benjamin MacQueen, who analyses the role and ideas of

Muslims outside Muslim-majority states with his examination of expatriate Sudanese intellectual Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im. In recent years, an-Na'im has emerged as a leading advocate of the applicability of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Muslim communities. An-Na'im promotes the idea that Muslim communities must take control of Islamic political and social doctrine to empower themselves in the face of persistent authoritarianism and human rights deprivation. Hermeneutics is a critical element in this process, allowing Muslim communities to peel back the layers of normative control that political and social elites have imposed over centuries.

However, an-Na'im's approach, one that may be indicative of many views from critical streams in Islamic thought, is restricted by a lack of attention to the mechanics of authoritarian rule that persist in many parts of the Muslim world. Specifically, MacQueen argues that an-Na'im does not pay enough attention to the lack of political space in many Muslim states whereby people are able to exercise individual agency as a means to challenge the political status quo.

In the second chapter of the volume, Rebecca Barlow investigates the divergent responses among Iranian women to gender-based discrimination under the *velayat-e faqih*, or the rule of Islamic jurisprudence. Two themes emerge in the discourse on gender rights in Iran and the relationship of this movement to the theocratic state system. First, a form of opposition based on a reinterpretation of religious texts aimed at countering the dominant patriarchal interpretations that have infused the prevailing themes of Islam's stance vis-à-vis gender rights. This viewpoint, Barlow argues, is conducted within the political boundaries established by the Iranian state as a form of integrated dissent. Alternatively, secular-oriented activists and intellectuals present a more elementary challenge to the rule of Islamic scholars in the Islamic Republic. These activists represent a form of anti-systemic opposition that challenges the very foundations of the *velayat-e faqih*.

What Barlow reveals is a broader tension between those who champion reform of the existing system and those seeking a social and political overhaul. This tension raises the question of whether significant reform of inequitable gender rights in Iran can occur within the existing system or whether the system itself is deficient in terms of its ability to meaningfully address this issue. The failure of Iran's 'reformist' movement between 1997 and 2004 to fundamentally

change Iran's patriarchal status quo has pushed the anti-systemic argument of secular-oriented women's rights activists to the fore. Such a perspective, argues Barlow, is encapsulated by the Nobel Peace Laureate, lawyer and activist Shirin Ebadi. Ebadi, and others such as Haleh Esfandiari and Roya Tolui, have directly confronted the legitimacy of Iran's ruling elites. Barlow's examination of Ebadi's challenge to the existing political and social order in Iran is a revealing example of a marginalised voice who courageously questions and critiques fundamental difficulties facing the Islamic Republic and its citizens.

These critical views are case studies of local, or micro, issues with macro implications. The questions of human rights and the changing definitions of political community hold implications for all Muslim communities. Sven Alexander Schottman continues this theme with an exploration of 'moderate Islamism' in Malaysia. Schottman's analysis highlights Malaysia's drift towards a more overt Islamic identity in the half a century since its independence. However, rather than a simple assertion of religious identity *per se*, many Malaysians have sought to develop an intellectual framework to guide them through this endeavour. Schottman's examination details how a small number of Malaysia's political elites in the post-Mahathir era have sought to develop a utilitarian perspective, one that emphasises the 'objectives' of the Islamic doctrine and law (*maqasid al-shari'a*) rather than literalist interpretations that have in many ways stifled the Islamic intellectual revival of the nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth century.

The government of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, which came to power in 2004, reflected this trend with its determination to develop an Islamic model that balanced the interests of Malaysia's majority Muslim citizens with the large non-Muslim minority in the country. Badawi's ten-point *Islam Hadari*, Schottman argues, represents the outcome of this utilitarian program where responsible government, tolerance, religious freedom and Islam are utilised towards helping Malaysia embrace its Islamic heritage away from literalist or oversimplistic interpretations of Islam in public life.

Similarly, Ismatu Ropi presents the case of religious freedom in Indonesia through the ongoing debate over the status of religion in the Muslim world's most populous state. Specifically, this chapter explores the debates over legislation concerning construction of houses of worship and efforts by Muslim, Christian and Confucian

Indonesians to ensure the protection of religious diversity. Drawing on extensive primary research, Ropi shows how successive Indonesian regimes sought to use the issue of religious freedom generally, and the construction of houses of worship specifically, in an effort to manipulate public opinion.

Despite this, Indonesia's civil society, including the vast Muslim organisations such as the Nahdlatul Ulama, have pressured regimes from Soekarno to Soeharto and the more recent regimes of Habibie, Wahid, Soekarnoputri and Yudoyono to modify their positions. This is a demonstration of the ability of grassroots organisations to ensure the vitality of religious diversity in Indonesia and also serves to symbolise the functionality of Muslim communities and Muslim activism in preserving religious freedom and diversity.

To this point, this volume has focused largely on the voices of Muslims within Muslim majority states. However, Kylie Baxter expands the perspective, examining Muslim communities in the 'West', particularly Europe. As MacQueen demonstrated in the volume's first chapter, the dynamics of political repression have often obstructed reformist voices in the Muslim world. In this final chapter, Baxter explores an Islamic perspective operating outside the constraints of that socio-political context. This chapter provides an examination of how the voices of the peripheral Muslim communities, traditionally dismissed within the broader currents of Islamic thought, are increasingly asserting their presence. Indeed, Western Muslims are uniquely placed to make a special contribution to theoretical and jurisprudential reform, as they are able to adapt Islam as a normative framework through which to explore the challenges and opportunities raised by the experience of minority status. Baxter suggests that rather than establishing barriers to the practice of their religion, life as a minority community has in many ways freed Muslims in the West to explore alternative and innovative aspects, particularly in relation to the social and political applications of the faith.

It is within this context that Baxter explores the thoughts of Tariq Ramadan, one of the most controversial Muslim thinkers of the late twentieth century. Ramadan's work pivots on the contribution Western Muslims can make to the evolution of Islamic thought and practice. Critical of Western Muslim leaderships, the role of the United States and the tyranny of contemporary Arab regimes,

Ramadan clearly blends the theological and the political, a tactic that has drawn criticisms from all quarters. Baxter shows how Ramadan's personal history, his links to the Muslim Brotherhood and his new investigation of traditional Muslim theology have propelled this Muslim academic to the forefront of Islamic discourse in the West.

The immediate functionality of these approaches may be difficult. However, the critical views contained within this volume highlight not only the vigorous debate occurring within Muslim communities about the very nature of religion and its relationship to society, they also show how marginalised voices are often the engines of reform in any society. This is the central theme of this compilation, and a crucial lesson for scholars interested in political and social transformation in Muslim communities. History demonstrates that material power rests with political and social elites, yet it is ideas that can be seized upon by those who have been marginalised. It is our hope this volume helps to amplify these voices in a small way.