THE PEOPLE ON THE EDGE:

Religious Reform and the Burden of the Western Muslim Intellectual

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SERIES EDITORS
DR. ANAS S. AL SHAIKH–ALI
SHIRAZ KHAN

FOREWORD

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT (IIIT) London Office has great pleasure in presenting Occasional Paper 19: *The People on the Edge: Religious Reform and the Burden of the Western Muslim Intellectual* by Dr. Abdelwahab El-Affendi.

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We would like to express our thanks and gratitude to Dr. Abdelwahab El-Affendi as well as the editorial and production team and those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this paper. May God reward them and the author for all their efforts.

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ANAS S. AL SHAIKH–ALI, CBE
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THE PEOPLE ON THE EDGE:
RELIGIOUS REFORM AND THE
BURDEN OF THE WESTERN
MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL*

THERE is a haunting and very powerful image in the Qur'an, depicting a category of people who, on the Day of Judgement, would be perched on the dividing barrier between heaven and hell, and from that point engage in a conversation with the inhabitants of both worlds (Qur'an, 7: 46-49). The portrayal, which occurs only once in the Qur'an, is vague about the ultimate fate of these "people of the edge," but there are hints, in addition to the generally sympathetic portrayal, that they will end up on the safer side of the barrier.

Apocalyptic images may seem appropriate to depict the dilemmas facing the beleaguered Muslim communities in the West in the bleak post-9/11 era. Even without the rising hostility to Muslim presence in the West, emigrant communities have already been facing the challenge of adapting to exogenous cultural norms and values, making it an uphill task to maintain an "authentic Muslim life."[1] As a consequence of the adjustments needed to accommodate Islam's minority status, it has been argued, "[t]he Islam of Muslim intellectuals in the West tends to assume a more ethereal character." The concrete manifestations of this tendency include the advocacy Sufism because "it is private enough to fit into the Western social order and it is public enough to remain an echo of the total Islamic order."[2] This in turn makes it "a reasonable hypothesis that Islam – or the way Muslim life is led – is likely to change a great deal in cases where religion is more or less forced into the private corner of one's life."[3]

For many Western Muslim intellectuals and some observers, however, this uncertain status of being "on the edge" may in fact be an advantage. Residing securely in the paradise of modernity, prosperity and "enlightenment," these intellectuals are also confident that they do, simultaneously, speak both to, and for, the rest of the Muslim community, seen to have been "left behind" in the purgatory of turmoil and darkness. As one prominent Western Muslim intellectual put it, "standing with one leg in the Orient and with the other one in the Occident" permits one to "understand both worlds sufficiently well to explain them to each other."[4]

With an increasing number of Muslim intellectuals achieving prominence in the West, from where they had seen their ideas and views widely propagated and discussed from the heart of Anatolia to the remote corners of Africa, Western Muslim intellectuals have reason to view their role with increased self-confidence. Especially in the US, where we can observe an unparalleled "high concentration of Muslim elites… particularly in the university system," it has been argued that we are currently witness to "a critical evaluation of religious texts not seen since at least the colonial period."[5] This may have already led to a shift in the intellectual centre of gravity away from traditional Muslim heartlands, with the United States fast becoming a major "world center of Islamic learning and intellectual life and thought," even potentially a "second Mecca."[6] In fact, it is claimed, there is today,

> much more intellectual Islamic life in the West than in the East. More serious books on Islam are being published in English than in Arabic… And since Muslim thinkers in the West can write without censorship, their production is likely to be essential for the development of Islam in the Muslim world. I think the Muslims in America and in Europe will be the leaders for the intellectual revitalization of the Muslims in the East.[7]

The efforts of US-based Muslim intellectuals to critically undermine the bases of authoritarianism in Islamic thought could warrant an "even more ambitious agenda following up on changes in Islam's ideology with changes in leadership and religious practices."[8]

There is much that justifies these ambitions, but one must guard against the imperceptible shift from ambition to illusion. To move from a valid appreciation of the increasing importance of the intellectual contribution of western Muslims to a "wag the dog" theory of ascribing to them a leadership role in religious reform may be as misguided – and as dangerous – an illusion as the idea that creating an American colony in Iraq was going to be an advertisement of America's love for democracy, and an inspiration for freedom lovers all over the Muslim world. Both illusions spring from the same quintessentially Western overconfidence, not to say arrogance, of which Muslim westerners are not immune.

In this paper, we argue that while Muslim intellectual activism in the West had deep historical roots and illustrious antecedents, the claims of the new emerging movements and intellectual figures to moral, intellectual and religious leadership of the Ummah are unprecedented in their boldness and pride in their specifically western/modernist credentials. Moreover, it is paradoxical that what is in essence a response to the precariousness of the increasingly vulnerable Muslim presence in the West is at the same time trying to present itself at the most authoritative interpretation of Islam. The paper traces the historical roots of western Muslim intellectual activism, and outlines the shifts and dynamics which gave its present form and conditioned its attempts to turn its vulnerability into an asset. It shows the ways in which the claims of the major contending trends within western Islam are novel, and assesses their success in attracting support both within the West and the wider Muslim world. We conclude that while the positions staked by these emerging trends are legitimate and significant, their claims for leadership are shaky and premature. They seem to be based on a misconception of the dynamics and sources of religious authority, which cannot be divorced from issues of identity within the religious community. Pride in being Western at a time of perceived conflict between Islam and the West becomes counterproductive unless the intellectuals can make an effective contribution to resolving or at least tempering this conflict. In addition, challenging an established religious

tradition requires more than the mere intellectual elaboration of a position, but must mobilize the deep spiritual resources of that tradition in support of the new position. The moral authority of the potential reformist is also closely linked to an ability to articulate Muslim concerns and the courage not only to challenge accepted tradition, but also to stand up to the powers that be.

A PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE

The excessive confidence of the spokespersons of Western Islam contrasts sharply with the doubly precarious Muslim presence in the West, both in terms of the relatively hostile environment and in terms of the pressures of secular political and intellectual hegemony. In an environment where the best Muslim is the "integrated" (read invisible) one, Muslim self-consciousness here is a fairly recent development, and it has crystallized in adverse circumstances of turmoil and conflict that make the preoccupation with survival and adaptation a central feature of this emerging self-consciousness. The circumstances surrounding specifically Muslim activism, and the assertion of *Muslim* identity in Europe and the West, were largely a reaction to adverse developments, either abroad or in the West. Events from the Algerian war of independence in the 1950s to the Algerian civil war in the 1990s (with Suez, Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, the Iranian revolution and the Iraq wars in between) have deeply impacted the psyche of Muslims living in the West and conditioned their attitude towards their countries of residence. Algerians (and other Muslims) living in France, for example, organized protests in support of the Algerian resistance, while Arab journalists working in the BBC refused to work, or resigned altogether, during the Suez crisis of 1956. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Palestinian *intifada* (from 1987), brought Muslim protestors to the streets in European cities in increasing numbers, often under Islamic banners.

Events within the West also worked to shape the self-awareness of Muslim communities here. These included the Salman Rushdie[9]

affair in Britain (1989) the headscarf controversy in France (from 1989) and the Bosnian war of 1991-1995. Such events had the cumulative impact of sharpening the sense of Muslim identity and derivatively increasing the visibility of Muslims *as Muslims*. Direct involvement by the US and major European powers in the wars on Iraq (from 1990) has tested the loyalties of some Muslim citizens in these countries to the limit. While Muslim agitation over issues like Iraq and Bosnia attracted solidarity from non-Muslim protestors (in spite of persistent Muslim complaints of insufficient support), the protests over the Rushdie affair or the headscarf bans were mostly a lonely Muslim affair.

By the time the September 11 atrocities in the United States (2001) were perpetrated, this process of polarization and differentiation of the Muslim community from the rest of society was already well advanced. The Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004 and, last but not least, the London bombings of July 7, 2005, only helped it along. The resulting and progressive polarization of identities set Muslims apart from other immigrants as well as from the rest of their European or American compatriots, and united Muslims from different backgrounds around common causes and a shared identity. Being a Muslim became a much more salient identity than wider identities shared with other communities ('immigrant', 'black', 'Asian', 'citizen', etc.), as well as narrower identities which had formerly been more meaningful for those involved ('Punjabi', 'Palestinian', 'Malay', 'Nigerian', etc.).

The emergence and crystallization of the Muslim presence in the context of these conflicts inevitably cast this "rise of Islam" in a negative light. The Rushdie Affair represented a turning point in this regard, for it brought together issues that elicited serious and deep concerns in the minds of Western intellectuals and policy makers.[10] This was especially the case since liberal and radical intellectuals who habitually supported Muslims as a disadvantaged community against perceived racism or xenophobia found it difficult to back Muslim demands in this instance. Some former 'liberal' or left leaning intellectuals have become very vociferous critics of Islam and

Muslims, often using language that will be difficult to distinguish from that habitually used by ultra-right wing thinkers.[11] It is no coincidence that the headscarf controversy in France had erupted in that period, which also coincided with a sharp rise in support for extreme right wing movements across Europe. The self-awareness of Muslims as Muslims was thus accompanied by a corresponding (often, but not always, negative) awareness of the 'alien' presence and visibility of 'Muslims' as a supposedly homogenous group embracing Arabs and Africans, Asians and Turks. This in turn tended to displace some earlier stereotypes of Asians, immigrants, or blacks, in the direction of one single community, with less guilt and self-consciousness.

The salience of Muslim identity and the sharpening of Muslim self-awareness have thus become integral to a dynamic process of adaptation to perceived adverse trends and threats, and in turn elicited more hostile reactions from wider sections of society at large. For example Muslim representative institutions created in Europe and the US themselves became targets for attacks from the media and rival lobby groups as either unrepresentative or extremist. It is in order to break out of this vicious circle that the new trends of thought and activism had emerged seeking to forge a new Muslim identity that could be more easily reconciled with Western identity.

EURO-ISLAM AND THE SECOND MAKKAH

It may be difficult in these circumstances to see in the beleaguered Muslim communities in the West a beacon of light for the wider Muslim community. But some European Muslims, while acknowledging the current crisis and the deep roots of the identity clash, struggle to point out the positive side of this dilemma. Tracing the mythical roots of the Islam/west identity polarization even further back, one writer seeks inspiration in symbolic depictions from early modern art, specifically in Rembrandt's drawings of Abraham's casting out of Hagar and her son Ishmael. One drawing shows "Hagar, young and fertile, being sent forth into the wilderness at the

ARE western Muslims an endangered species, or are they the future of Islam? The accelerated adaptation and change western Muslims are pushed to make in order just to survive has galvanized them into a serious effort of rethinking and reflection. This has, in turn, moved the worldwide debate on Islamic reform into a new higher gear. While Muslim intellectual activism in the West had deep historical roots, the claims of the new emerging movements and intellectual figures to moral, intellectual and religious leadership of the Ummah are unprecedented in their boldness and pride in their specifically western/modernist credentials. Moreover, it is paradoxical that what is in essence a response to the precariousness of the increasingly vulnerable Muslim presence in the West is at the same time trying to present itself as the most authoritative interpretation of Islam. This paper traces the historical roots of western Muslim intellectual activism, and assesses its success in attracting support both within the West and the wider Muslim world.

ABDELWAHAB EL-AFFENDI

The author is Reader in Politics at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster and Co-ordinator of the Centre's Democracy and Islam Programme. Educated at the Universities of Khartoum, Wales, and Reading, he is author of *Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan* (1991), *Who Needs an Islamic State?* (1991), *Revolution and Political Reform in Sudan* (1995), *Rethinking Islam and Modernity* (2001), *For a State of Peace: Conflict and the Future of Democracy in Sudan* (2002) and *The Conquest of Muslim Hearts and Minds: Perspectives on U.S. Reform and Public Diplomacy Strategies* (2005). Dr. El-Affendi was a member of the core team of authors of the *Arab Human Development Report* (2004) and a member of the Advisory Board and a contributor to the 2005 report. He is also a member of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, member of the Board of Directors of Inter-Africa Group, and a trustee of the International Forum for Islamic Dialogue, and on the AMSS UK Advisory Board.

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