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The Coming Transformation in the Muslim World

Dale F. Eickelman

Like the printing press in sixteenth-century Europe, the combination of mass education and mass communications is transforming the Muslim-majority world, a broad geographical crescent stretching from North Africa through Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Indonesian archipelago. In unprecedented numbers, the faithful—whether in the vast cosmopolitan city of Istanbul, the suburbs of Paris, or in the remote oases of Oman's mountainous interior—are examining and debating the fundamentals of Muslim belief and practice in ways that their less self-conscious predecessors in the faith would never have imagined.

Buzzwords such as "fundamentalism" and catchy phrases such as Samuel Huntington's "West versus the rest" or Daniel Lerner's "Mecca or mechanization" are of little use in understanding this transformation.[1] Indeed, they obscure or even distort the immense spiritual and intellectual ferment that is taking place today among the world's nearly 1 billion Muslims, reducing it to a fanatical rejection of everything modern, liberal, or progressive. To be sure, such fanaticism plays a part in what is happening—dramatically and violently—but it is not the entire story.

A far more important element is the unprecedented access that ordinary people now have to sources of information and knowledge about religion and other aspects of their society. Quite simply, in country after country, government officials, traditional religious scholars, and officially sanctioned preachers are finding it hard to monopolize the tools of literate culture.

INTELLECTUAL MONOPOLIES BROKEN

No longer can governments control what their people know and what they think. The intellectual monopolies of the past have been irrevocably broken. What distinguishes the present from previous eras is the large numbers of believers engaged in the "reconstruction" of religion, community, and society. In the past, one thought of profound changes in ideas and doctrines primarily in terms of "top-down" approaches and formal ideologies. Political or religious leaders would prescribe, and others were to follow. In the late twentieth century, the major impetus for change in religious and political values is coming from "below." It is not just changes in explicit ideologies that matter, but also the implicit background understandings against which beliefs and practices are formulated.[2]

Thus, in one of the first major syntheses on the changing nature of the Muslim experience in Europe, scholar Gilles Kepel's 1987 book *Les banlieues de l'Islam: naissance d'une religion en France* (Islam's Suburbs: The Birth of a Religion in France) presaged the shift from being Muslim in France to

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[1]See Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 405; Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs,* Summer 1993.

[2]See Charles Taylor, "Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere," in the *Tanner Lectures on Human Values,* vol. 14 (1993), pp. 217–219.

being French Muslim. In Turkey, this means that an increasing number of Turks, especially those of the younger generation, see themselves as European and Muslim at the same time, as do politicians in the Netherlands such as Oussama Cherribi, a Moroccan-born member of parliament. And some Iranians, such as political scientist Fariba Adelkhah, argue that the major transformations of the Iranian revolution occurred not in 1978–1979, but with the coming of age of a new generation of Iranians who were not even born at that time. These transformations include a greater sense of autonomy for both women and men and the emergence of a public sphere in which politics and religion are subtly intertwined, and not always as anticipated by Iran's formal religious leaders.[3]

ISLAM IN THE "MODERN" ERA

If modernity is defined as the emergence of new kinds of public space, including those not imagined by preceding generations, then developments in France, Turkey, Iran, and elsewhere suggest that we are living through a period of profound social transformation for the Muslim-majority world.

Distinctive to the modern era is that discourse and debate about Muslim tradition involve people on a mass scale. They also necessarily involve an awareness of other Muslim and non-Muslim traditions. Mass education and mass communication in the modern world facilitate an awareness of the new and unconventional. In changing the style and scale of possible discourse, these tools reconfigure the nature of religious thought and action, create new forms of public space, and encourage debate over meaning.

Mass education and mass communications are important in all contemporary world religions. However, the full effects of mass education, especially higher education, have only begun to be felt in much of the Muslim world since mid-century and in many countries considerably later. Morocco, for example, committed itself to universal schooling after gaining independence from France in 1956. Though in 1957 only 13,000 secondary school degrees were awarded, and university enrollments remained low, by 1965 more than 200,000 students were in secondary schools, and some 20,000 in universities. By 1992, secondary school enrollment topped 1.5 million, and univer-

sity students numbered 240,000. While illiteracy rates in the general populace remain high—43 percent for men and 69 percent for women—a critical mass of educated people are now able to read and think for themselves.

The situation in Oman is more dramatic because the transformation has taken place in a much shorter period. In 1975–1976, a mere 22 students graduated from secondary school. Little more than a decade later, in 1987–1988, 13,500 students were enrolled in secondary education institutions. In 1996–1997, 76,500 were enrolled, and more than 7,000 students were in postsecondary institutions, including the national university, which had opened in 1986.

Elsewhere a similar picture emerges, although the starting dates and levels of achievement differ. In Turkey, mass education has reached every city, town, and village. Adult illiteracy rates as of 1995 were 8 percent for males and 28 percent for females, down from 65 percent and 85 percent, respectively, four decades earlier. Secondary schools are now ubiquitous, and both private and public universities have proliferated. In Indonesia, university enrollment, only 50,000 in 1960, reached 1.9 million in 1990. Iran also has seen a significant expansion in education opportunities at all levels.

Although in Egypt, Morocco, and many other Muslim-majority nations population growth has outpaced educational expansion, the number of people able to question religious and political authorities, and not just listen to them, has increased dramatically. Women's access to education still lags behind that of men, although the gap is rapidly closing in many countries, including Turkey, Kuwait, and Malaysia.

MULTIMEDIA

Both mass education and mass communications—especially the proliferation of media and the means by which people communicate—have had a profound effect on how people think about religion and politics throughout the Muslim world. Multiple means of communication make the unilateral control of information and opinion much more difficult and foster, albeit inadvertently, a civil society of dissent. We are still in the early stages of understanding how different media—including print, satellite and broadcast television, radio, and audiocassettes—influence groups and individuals, encouraging unity in some

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[3]Fariba Adelkhah, *Being Modern in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

contexts and fragmentation in others, but a few salient features may be sketched.[4]

At the "high" end of this transformation is the rise to significance of books such as *al-Kitab wa-l-Qur'an* (The Book and the Koran), published in 1992 and written by the Syrian civil engineer Muhammad Shahrur. Although its circulation has been banned or discouraged in many places, it has sold tens of thousands of copies throughout the Arab world. The success of Shahrur's first book—regarded by legal scholar Wael Hallaq as the "most convincing" of attempts to reformulate Islamic legal theory—could not have been imagined before large numbers of people were able to read and understand its advocacy of reinterpreting ideas of religious authority and tradition and applying Islamic precepts to contemporary society.

Shahrur draws an analogy between the Copernican revolution and Koranic interpretation, which he says has been shackled for "too long" by the conventions of medieval jurists: "People believed for a long time that the sun revolved around the earth, but they were unable to explain some phenomena derived from this assumption until one person, human like themselves, said, 'The opposite is true: The earth revolves around the sun.'. . . After a quarter of a century of study and reflection, it dawned on me that we Muslims are shackled by prejudices [*musallimat*], some of which are completely opposite the [correct perspective]."[5]

On issues ranging from the role of women in society to rekindling a "creative interaction" with non-Muslim philosophies, Shahrur argues that Muslims should reinterpret sacred texts and apply them to contemporary social and moral issues: "If Islam is sound [*salih*] for all times and places," Shahrur writes, Muslims should not neglect historical developments, but must act as if "the Prophet just . . . informed us of this Book."

Shahrur is not alone in attacking both conventional religious wisdom and the intolerant certainties of religious radicals and in arguing instead for a constant and open reinterpretation of how sacred texts apply to social and political life. Another Syr-

ian thinker, the secularist Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, for instance, does the same. A debate between al-Azm and Qatari Shaikh Yusif al-Qaradawi, a conservative religious intellectual, was broadcast on Qatar's al-Jazeera satellite television on May 27, 1997 on the program "The Opposite Direction." For the first time in the memory of many viewers, the religious conservative came across as the weaker, more defensive voice.

Al-Jazeera is a new phenomenon in Arab-language broadcasting because its talk shows, such as "The Opposite Direction," feature live discussions on such sensitive issues as women's role in society, polygamy, Palestinian refugees, sanctions on Iraq, and democracy and human rights in the Arab world. Similar discussions are unlikely to be rebroadcast on state-controlled television in most Arab nations, where programming on religious and political themes is generally cautious. Nevertheless, satellite technology and videotape render traditional censorship ineffective.

IDEAS CROSSING BORDERS

Tapes of these satellite television broadcasts circulate from hand to hand in Morocco, Oman, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and elsewhere. Al-Jazeera shows that people across the Arab world, like their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim-majority world, want open discussion of the issues that affect their lives, and that new communications technologies make it impossible for governments and established religious authorities to stop them.

Other voices also advocate reform. Fethullah Gülen, Turkey's version of media-savvy American evangelist Billy Graham, appeals to a mass audience. In televised chat shows, interviews, and occasional sermons, Gülen speaks about Islam and science, democracy, modernity, religious and ideological tolerance, the importance of education, and current events. Gülen has his finger on the pulse of a wide spectrum of religious-minded Turks.[6] And religious movements such as Turkey's Risale-i Nur, or the Nurcus, appeal increasingly to religious moderates. In stressing the links between Islam, reason, science, and modernity, and the lack of inherent clash between "East" and "West," these movements promote education at all levels and appeal to a growing number of educated Turks.[7]

Iran's Abdolkarim Soroush argues that a proper understanding of Islam requires dialogue, a willingness to understand the opinions of others, adaptation, and civility. Indonesian and Malaysian moderates make similar arguments. To the annoy-

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[4]See Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[5]Translations from *The Book and The Koran* are by Dale F. Eickelman.

[6]See Bülent Aras, "Turkish Islam's Moderate Face," *Middle East Quarterly,* September 1998.

[7]The group's website, in both English and Turkish, can be found at www.nesil.com.tr.

ance of more conservative clerics, Soroush has captured the religious imagination of Persian speakers in Iran and abroad, and his work, in translation and on the Internet in several languages including Turkish, Arabic, and English, has a reach far beyond Iran.[8] In Pakistan, a 1997 book making an argument parallel to Shahrur's, *Qur'anic and Non-Qur'anic Islam,* by Nazir Ahmad, a retired military officer, quickly went into a second printing.

Not all religious books are aimed at the intellectual elite. Mass schooling has created a wide audience of people who read but are not literary sophisticates, and there has been an explosive growth in what French scholar Yves Gonzalez-Quijano calls generic "Islamic books": inexpensive, attractively printed texts intended for such readers. Many address practical questions of Muslim life in the modern world and the perils of neglecting Islamic obligations—and not all appeal to reason and moderation. Many of these books have bold, eye-catching covers and sensational titles such as *The Terrors of the Grave, or What Follows Death,* by Egyptian writer Ahmad al-Tahtawi, which informs readers of what awaits them if they do not prepare properly for Judgment Day. Other, more subdued works offer advice to young women on how to live as Muslims today. Often based on the sermons of popular preachers, Islamic books are written in a breezy colloquial style instead of with the cadences of traditional literary Arabic, and are sold on sidewalks and outside mosques rather than in bookstores. While Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz is considered successful if he sells 5,000 copies of one of his novels in a year in his own country, Islamic books often have sales numbering in six figures.

A MARKETPLACE OF VIEWS

As a result of direct and broad access to the printed, broadcast, and taped word, more and more Muslims are individually interpreting the textual sources—classical or modern—of Islam. Much has been made of the "opening up" (*infitah*) of the economies of many Muslim countries, allowing market forces to reshape economies, regardless of the painful short-term consequences. In a similar fashion, intellectual market forces support some forms of religious innovation and activity over others.

In Bangladesh, women's romance novels, once a popular specialty distributed in secular

Opposite Directions   Egyptian religious conservative Safinez Kadhim (standing, right), accuses Toujan Faisal (left), the first woman member of Jordan's parliament, of blasphemy during a live broadcast of "The Opposite Direction" on al-Jazeera satellite television in 1997. When the moderator, Faisal al-Qasim (center), reminded Kadhim that she was on live television, she replied, "I don't care if we're on Mars. I'm going back to Cairo," and stormed out of the studio.

bookstores, now have Islamic counterparts that are distributed through Islamic bookstores, making it difficult to distinguish between "Muslim" romance novels and "secular" ones. The result is a collapse of earlier, hierarchical notions of religious authority based on claims to the mastery of fixed bodies of religious texts. Even where there are state-appointed religious authorities—as in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt—no longer is there any guarantee that their word will be heeded, or even that they themselves will follow the lead of the regime.

Religious activists in Egypt, the West Bank, and elsewhere are more likely to be the products of mass higher education than of such traditional educational institutions as the madrasa, or mosque-

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[8]See Valla Vakili, *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996).

school. The result of the "massification" of education, especially higher education, and the proliferation of means of communication is to challenge and collapse centralized and hierarchical claims to authority. No one group or type of leader in contemporary Muslim societies possesses a monopoly on the management of the sacred. Without fanfare, the idea of Islam as dialogue and civil debate is gaining ground. This new sense of public space is emerging throughout Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere. It is shaped by increasingly open contests over the use of the symbolic language of Islam.

DISCOURSE BECOMES GLOBAL

Increasingly, discussions in newspapers, on the Internet, on smuggled cassettes, and on television cross-cut and overlap, contributing to a common public space. New and accessible modes of communication have made these contests increasingly global, so that even local issues take on transnational dimensions.

The combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created. This mixture feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.

Finally, two cautions are in order. The first is that an expanding public sphere need not necessarily indicate more favorable prospects for democracy. Authoritarian regimes are compatible with an expanding public sphere, although the latter offers wider avenues for awareness of competing and alternate forms of religious and political authority. Nor does civil society necessarily entail democracy, although it is a precondition for democracy.

Still, publicly shared ideas of community, identity, and leadership take new shapes in such engagements, even as many communities and authorities claim an unchanged continuity with the past. Mass education, so important in the development of nationalism in an earlier era, and a proliferation of media and means of communication have multiplied the possibilities for creating communities and networks among them, dissolving previous barriers of space and distance, and opening new grounds for interaction and mutual recognition. ∎